

## Commencement Matter Debate

30 April 2021

**Senator Mary Fitzpatrick:**

*The need for the Minister for Transport to address the house on the need for financial support for taxi drivers, who are essential public transport providers, specifically to address their fixed costs, extending vehicle life to avoid them having to spend money buying new vehicles, to pause issuing new licenses until the economy reopens, ensure continued access to bus lanes and to review the Taxi council with a view to ensuring effective consultation with the sector.*

### Opening Statement

On behalf of Minister Eamon Ryan, I would like to thank the Senator for raising this matter here today.

The Government is acutely aware of the very difficult situation facing the taxi and small public service vehicle industry, or SPSV industry, today. Only yesterday the Minister met with the Advisory Committee on SPSVs to hear first-hand about the difficulties facing the sector and discuss the challenges ahead. The sector is particularly dependent on the hospitality industry and the gradual reopening of society over the next months should hopefully see passenger demand for services beginning to return.

Nevertheless, we aren't there yet. COVID-19 continues to have a profound effect on the working lives of individuals from all walks of life right across the country. That is why the Government has put in place support measures with broad eligibility criteria. Self-employed individuals, such as taxi operators, can and have availed of these supports which include the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, liquidity and investment measures, and tax relief measures.

I want to use my time here today to mainly talk about the supports available to taxi drivers, but the Minister has asked me to deal with two issues briefly.

First, there are no plans to change access arrangements for bus lanes. This has been made clear to taxi representatives in the Minister's meetings and his Department's correspondence with them and I sincerely hope that this clarifies the matter once and for all today.

Second, it has been two decades since quantitative controls on the taxi industry were lifted. It is well known that the taxi industry has been badly affected by COVID-19 and, as experience over the last year has shown, there are very few people wishing to enter the industry. A moratorium on licences would deliver no practical benefit to anyone and, accordingly, there are no plans to introduce one.

This Government is committed to providing practical supports to assist SPSV operators and to supporting drivers return to work when circumstances allow. That is why self-employed individuals, including taxi drivers, can earn up to €960 in a given eight-week period, net of expenses, without jeopardising their PUP entitlement.

Furthermore, taxi operators coming off the PUP and returning to work full-time can avail of the Enterprise Support Grant, a €1,000 grant which can be used towards the costs associated with reopening a business. For SPSV operators, these could include personal protective equipment, vehicle costs, and cleaning supplies.

The suite of COVID-19 support measures is complemented by specific SPSV industry measures. The National Transport Authority (NTA), the statutory regulator for the sector, has introduced late fee waivers, facilitated temporary licence suspensions and insurance suspensions, and provides

guidance to operators on reducing the risk of spreading COVID-19. The NTA has also been supporting the industry through its information line for operators and sending regular updates and responses to specific queries through emails and texts.

Also, the Department of Transport has provided for the waiving of all standard taxi licence renewal fees for 2021 at a cost of approximately €2.6 million.

The eSPSV scheme, which provides grants to support the purchase of electric vehicles, was increased from €1 million to €15 million. Furthermore, the maximum amount payable under the scheme was doubled to €20,000 for operators who scrap older vehicles and make the switch to full electric models. The purchase of a new vehicle is usually the largest cost that any taxi driver faces, and that is why the Minister has offered this practical assistance to drivers at this difficult time.

At the same time, the NTA has extended age limits for taxis twice since the start of the pandemic and has kept the issue under active review. They are currently proposing a further extension and a consultation on this latest proposal is underway. This is to be welcomed and, if approved, will mean that no vehicle will reach its age limit until 2022, thereby ensuring that no taxi operators will be required to change their vehicle while current demand for taxi services remains so low due to COVID-19.

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