

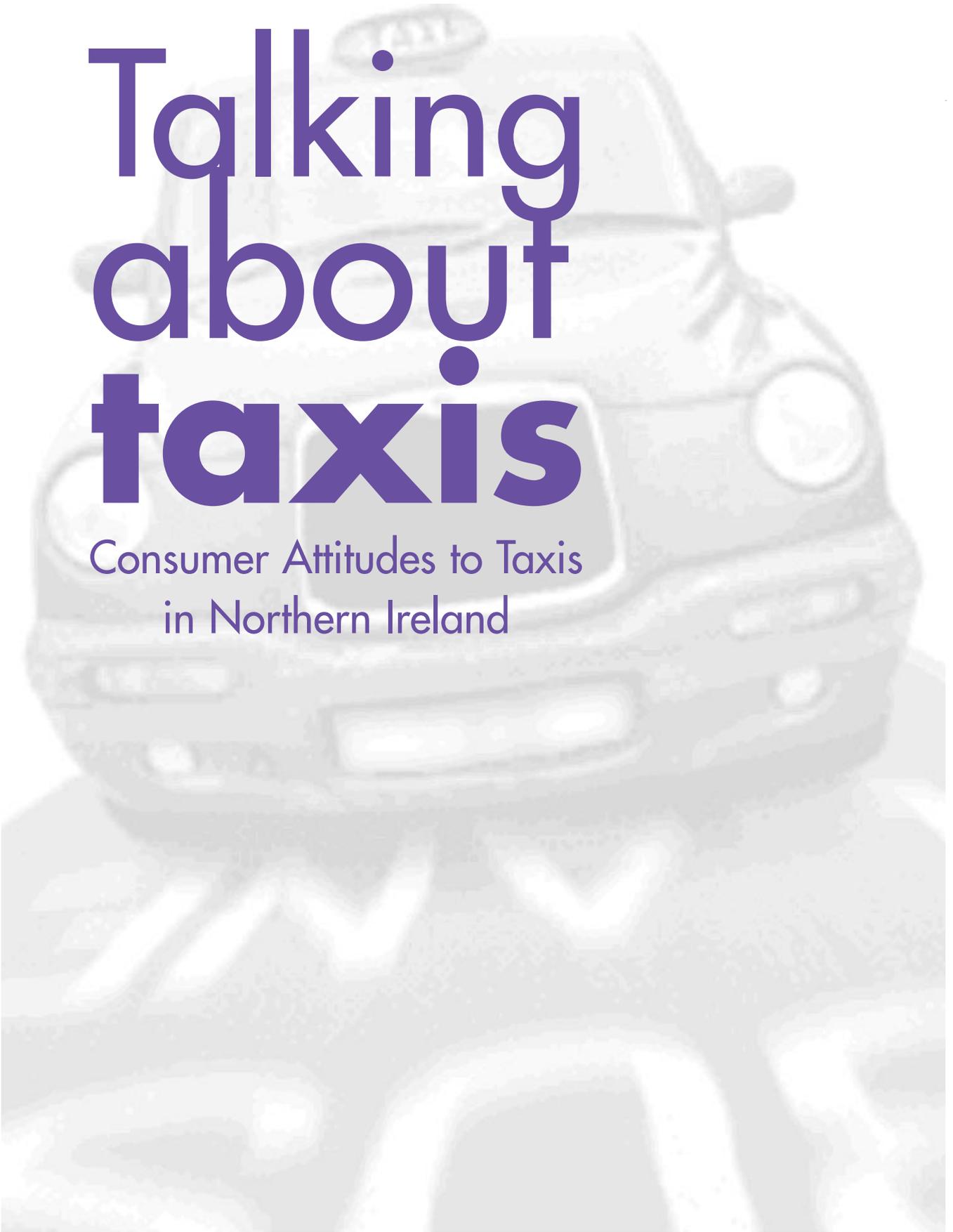
Talking about **taxis**

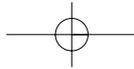
A General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland Report



Talking about **taxis**

Consumer Attitudes to Taxis
in Northern Ireland





THE GOVERNMENT REVIEW

In November 2002, the Department of the Environment (DoE) announced a review of legislation regulating taxi services in Northern Ireland. The Review seeks to address the structure and organisation of the industry, economic regulation and the licensing of taxi operators, drivers and their vehicles. It will have to take into account the changes in the taxi industry over the past few years which include the marked increase in the number of licensed taxis, their contribution to transport provision and the problems caused by illegal taxiing¹. This paper outlines consumer views on the taxi industry in Northern Ireland.

THE TAXI INDUSTRY

The taxi industry is an integral part of the Northern Ireland transport network.

The Regional Transportation Strategy published by the Department for Regional Development (2002) stated: "Taxis provide an important service, often offering the only means of public transport in certain areas and at certain times of the day."

Latest figures illustrate that there are currently around 6,250 licensed taxis operating in Northern Ireland². The industry consists of two main types of taxis: private and public hire as well as taxi buses.

PUBLIC HIRE TAXIS

Public hire taxis have the exclusive right to be hailed down on the street and to stand at taxi ranks. These are traditionally referred to as Hackney Carriages. Within this type there are taxis licensed for public hire within the City of Belfast known as Belfast Public Hire and there are public hire taxis operating outside Belfast known as Restricted Public Hire (outside Belfast, public hire taxis tend to be saloon cars).

PRIVATE HIRE TAXIS

A private hire licence authorises the taxi to carry passengers who have pre-booked by telephone or in person at a taxi depot. It is not licensed to ply for trade or pick passengers up from taxi ranks.

1. DoE, 2002, News Release: Angela Smith announces a Review of Taxi Regulation in Northern Ireland, 20 Nov. 2002.

2. DoE, 2002, *Review of Taxi Regulation in Northern Ireland*, Background Issues Paper.



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TAXI BUSES

There are also a number of taxi vehicles which operate bus-type services on particular routes in Belfast and Londonderry. These services need to be licensed as a bus service and hold a Road Service License although they use taxi vehicles. These are also known as Black Taxis. Only taxis belonging to the West Belfast Association are licensed to operate bus-type services. Although some taxis in north Belfast and in Londonderry operate bus-type services, they are not licensed to do so.

The Department of the Environment reported that between 1993 - 1994 and 2001 - 2002, the number of public hire taxis in Belfast more than doubled (from 99 to 224). The number of public hire taxis outside Belfast trebled (from 1112 to 3561). Over the same period, the number of private hire taxis fell by nine per cent (from 2709 to 2462). Overall, there are 60 per cent (2300) more licensed taxis in Northern Ireland now than there were in the early 1990s³.

REGULATION

In Northern Ireland, taxi regulation is the responsibility of the Department of the Environment. It is responsible for licensing all Public Service Vehicles ie any vehicle carrying passengers for reward. Currently, there are no limits on the number of licensed vehicles or driver licenses issued by the Department of the Environment.

In order to obtain a taxi license, a driver must meet a number of requirements relating to character and health. The applicant must also have held a car driving license for at least 12 months. Unlike London and Dublin, there is no local area knowledge-based test for potential taxi drivers.

Vehicles licensed as taxis must undergo an annual Public Service Vehicle (PSV) test for roadworthiness and suitability as well as being subject to spot checks. At present, depots or booking offices are unregulated.

SETTING FARES

There are also differences in how taxis fares are set. By law, Belfast public hire taxis must have a taximeter installed, which is tested and sealed annually by the DoE. The Department also sets the fare tariffs for journeys within a five-mile radius of Belfast city centre. Public hire taxis outside Belfast and private hire taxis do not have their fares regulated. Although a number of operators have voluntarily installed taximeters (these are not regulated by the Department). Taxi buses also do not have regulated fares.

³. DoE, 2002, *Review of Taxi Regulation in Northern Ireland*, Background Issues Paper.

TAXI CUSTOMERS

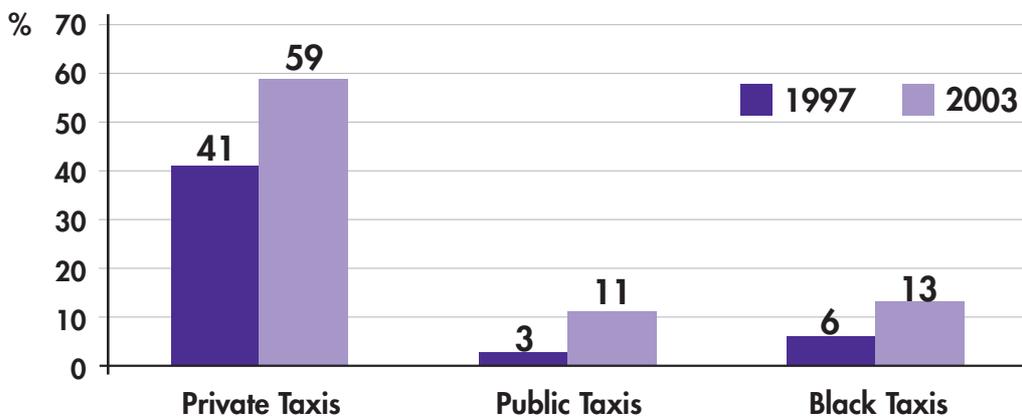
The DoE undertook a consumer survey of a representative sample of Northern Ireland consumers in February 2003 to analyse consumers' experiences of using taxis.

A sample of 2000 addresses from a Valuation and Lands Agency database was classified into three regions: Belfast, east Northern Ireland and west Northern Ireland. A sample of eligible respondents, aged 16 years and over, was randomly selected for interview from each classification. The sample was weighted according to household size. Interviewer-assisted surveys (n = 1214) were conducted between February and March 2003. The sample included 43 per cent males and 57 per cent females and the socio-economic groupings were as follows: ABC1 = 50 per cent; C2 = 17 per cent; DE = 23 per cent (ten per cent unknown).

This repeated previous research carried out by the General Consumer Council in 1997. The survey results revealed that 59 per cent of consumers use private hire taxis; 11 per cent use public hire taxis and 13 per cent use black taxis (taxis providing bus type services) at least once a year. The percentage of consumers who use all types of taxis at least once a year has substantially increased from 1997 (refer to figure 1). There could be a number of reasons for this marked increase. For example, a higher level of disposable income and the Government's continued anti-drink-driving campaign may have made consumers opt for a taxi rather than use their car for a social evening out. Results also reveal more consumers from Belfast would use all three types of taxis at least once a year than consumers from the east or west of the province.

During the years 1999 to 2001, every person in Northern Ireland travelled on average 66 miles by taxi and seven miles by black taxi per year. This compares to 53 miles by Northern Ireland Railways per year and 41 miles by Citybus per year⁴.

Figure 1 – Consumers who use taxis at least once a year

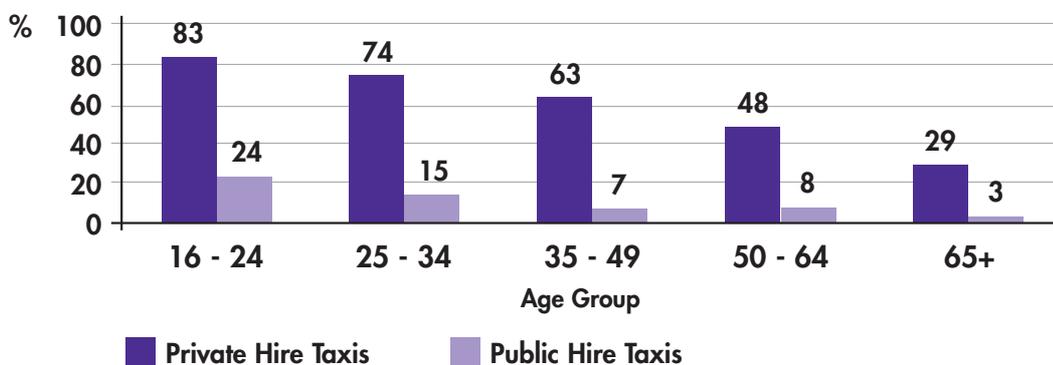


4. Roads Service, 2003, Travel Survey for Northern Ireland 1999-2001.

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Women are just as likely to use public and private hire taxis as men. However, there was a significant relationship between the age of the consumer and the use of taxis. As the age of the respondents increased, the percentage that used taxis at least once a year decreased accordingly. For example, eight out of ten (83 per cent) respondents aged 16 to 24 years used private hire taxis at least once a year whereas only three out of ten (29 per cent) of those aged over 65 years used private hire taxis at least once a year. The trend is also the same for public hire taxis (refer to figure 2).

Figure 2 – Percentage of Consumers who use taxis at least once a year



Belfast residents were more likely to use both private hire and public hire taxis at least once a year more than residents in areas in the east and west of the province. Car ownership is also a major factor in whether consumers use taxis. Those consumers without access to car would use both private and public hire taxis at least once a year significantly more than car owners.

FREQUENCY OF USING TAXIS

The survey asked consumers how frequently they would use the different types of taxis (refer to figure 3), six per cent of consumers stated they used a public hire taxi every month with two per cent using them every week. The results showed consumers use private hire taxis more frequently: almost half of respondents (43 per cent) used a private hire taxi once a month, with 18 per cent using them at least once a week. Only 38 per cent of consumers would never use a private hire taxi. Black taxis were also used more frequently than public hire taxis with ten per cent of consumers using them once a month and four per cent every week, despite their limitations to north and west Belfast.

During 1999 to 2001, every person made an average of 978 journeys per year in Northern Ireland, 17 of these were taxi journeys and two were journeys by black taxi. The average journey length by taxi was 3.8 miles, which compared to 21.3 by Northern Ireland Railways, 8.9 by Ulsterbus and 3.8 miles by Citybus⁵.

⁵ Roads Service, 2003, Travel Survey for Northern Ireland 1999-2001

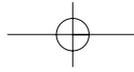
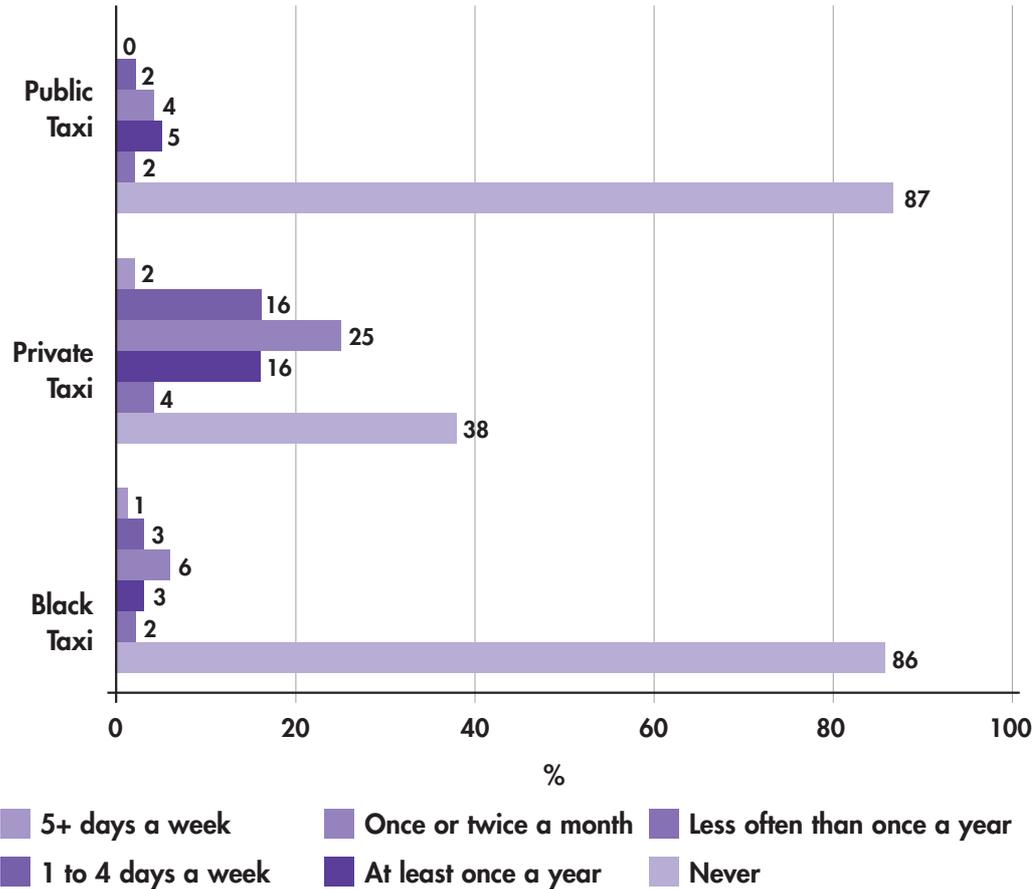


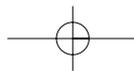
Figure 3 – Frequency of using taxis



As well as young consumers being more likely to use taxis, they also use private and public hire taxis more often. Four out of ten (42 per cent) young consumers (16 to 24 years old) use private taxis weekly with eight per cent using them daily.

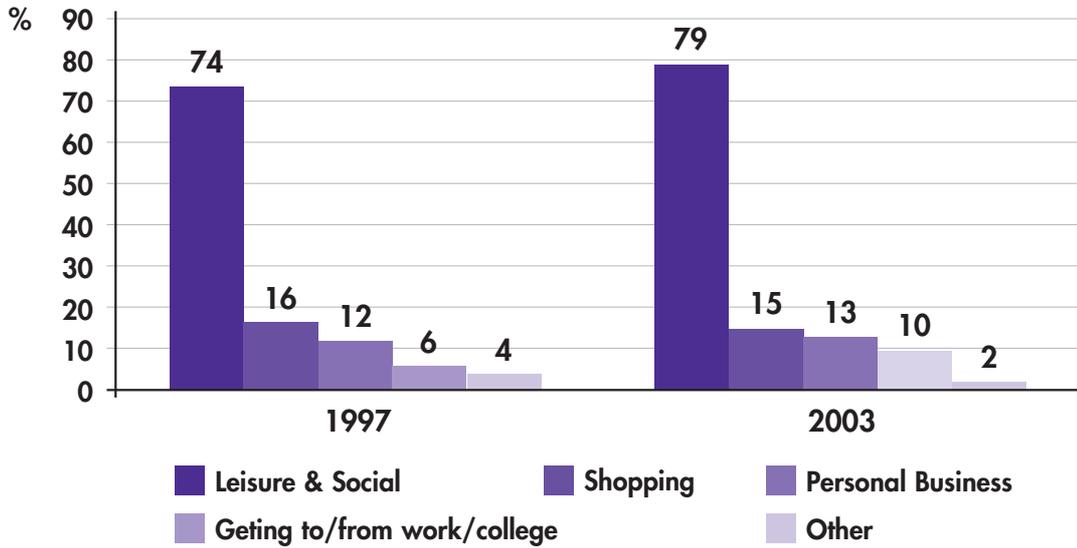
MAIN PURPOSE OF TAXI JOURNEY

Leisure and social trips were the main reason for using taxis in both 1997 and 2003 (refer to figure 4). The 2003 results also show that more women use taxis for shopping than men and more men use taxis for leisure or social purposes than women. There are also differences between different socio-economic groups and the main reason for using a taxi. Those from group DE use taxis for shopping and personal business purposes more than the other socio-economic groups. Indeed, groups ABC1 and C2 use taxis for leisure and social occasions more than group DE.



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Figure 4 – Comparison of the main journey purpose between 1997 and 2003

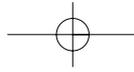


TAXI USE THROUGHOUT THE DAY

Over half (52 per cent) of the respondents reported that taxi journeys most frequently occurred between 6pm and midnight. This correlates with the majority of taxi journeys reasons being for social or leisure reasons (refer to figure 5).

Figure 5 - Taxi use throughout the day

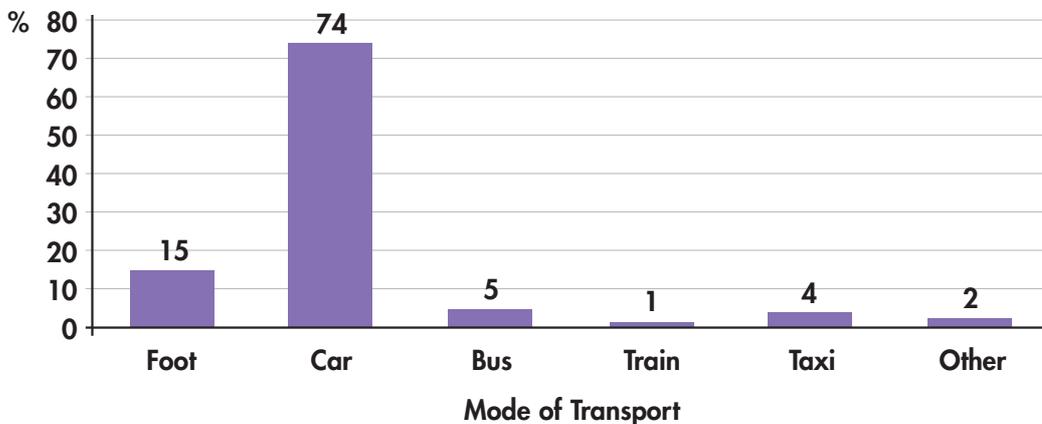
All those who use public/private taxi services at least once a year	%
During the day	27
Between 6pm and midnight	52
Between midnight and 6am	21
Don't know	0



TAXI DEPENDENCY

Consumers were also asked what was their main way of getting around. Four per cent of respondents are dependent on taxis as their main mode of transport. This is highly significant as only five per cent of consumers are dependent on the bus, and for one per cent of consumers, the train is their main way of getting around (refer to figure 6). This illustrates the importance of taxis within the Northern Ireland transport network.

Figure 6 – Consumers' main way of getting about

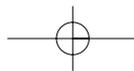


Six per cent of females use taxis as their main mode of transport compared to two per cent of males. A slightly higher proportion of those from socio-economic group DE use taxis as their main way of getting around compared to the other social groups (Ten per cent of consumers from DE use taxis as their main way of getting around compared to two per cent from ABC1 and one per cent from C2).

Car ownership is again a major factor as to whether consumers use taxis, as no consumers owning cars use taxis as their main mode of transport compared to 16 per cent of consumers who do not own cars. Almost one in ten consumers (nine per cent) of consumers from Belfast use taxis as their main way of getting about compared to those from the east (three per cent) and west (four per cent) of the province.

CONSUMERS' VIEWS

The convenience and speed of service offered by taxis was what consumers liked most about both private and public hire (refer to figure 7). Consumers liked the door-to-door service provided by private hire taxis and that they could be booked in advance. They also liked the fact that public hire taxis could pick up on the street.



Talking about taxis

Figure 7 – What consumers liked most about the service provided by taxis

All those who use each type of taxi service at least once a year	% Private Hire*	% Public Hire*
Able to book a taxi ahead	40	12
Able to pick up at stand or in street	5	40
Convenience/speed	58	59
Door-to-door	52	28
Driver courteous/helpful/friendly	14	7
Vehicle type (e.g. saloon v hackney)	0	1
Vehicle clean	4	4
Vehicle comfortable	4	6
Other	11	9

* Percentages may add to more than 100% due to multiple responses.

The aspects consumers disliked most about both type of taxi were having to wait or not being able to get a taxi when needed, followed by the actual cost of the fare (refer to figure 8).

Figure 8 – What consumers disliked most about the service provided by taxis

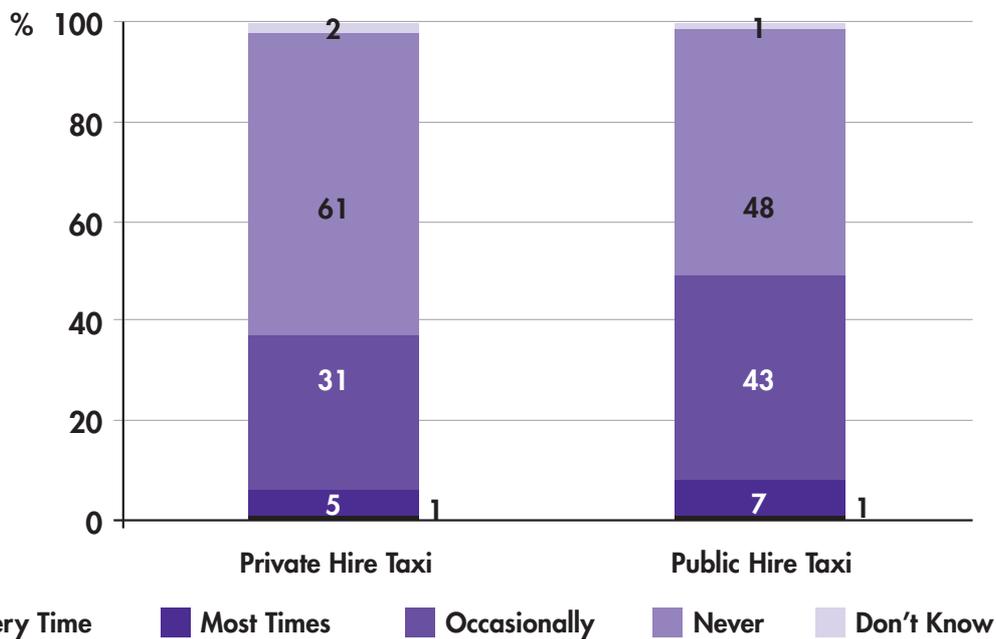
All those who use each type of taxi service at least once a year	% Private Hire*	% Public Hire*
Having to book ahead	7	6
Having to pick up at a stand/in the street	1	6
Having to wait/not being able to get taxi when I want one	33	38
Driver unhelpful/rude/unfriendly	6	7
Vehicle type (e.g. saloon v hackney)	0	2
Vehicle dirty (including smelly/smoky)	6	3
Vehicle/ride uncomfortable	2	3
Cost	32	24
Being over charged	8	9
Being pressurised to share	2	7
Other	19	21
Refusal	1	n/a
Don't Know	5	4

*Percentages may add to more than 100% due to multiple responses.

CONCERNS

Over half (51 per cent) of consumers perceive that a public hire taxi and almost two-fifths (37 per cent) of consumers perceive a private hire taxi has overcharged them. Less than half of consumers (48 per cent) using public hire taxis believe they have never been overcharged (refer to figure 9).

Figure 9 – Consumer perceptions of being overcharged



Pressure to share your taxi journey with someone else is a problem typically associated with public hire taxis but the statistics illustrate that this can also happen with private hire. Half (50 per cent) of consumers have been pressurised to share public hire taxis and almost a quarter (22 per cent) of consumers have been pressurised to share a private hire taxi.

The majority of consumers thought their journeys using both private and public hire taxis were speedy door-to-door trips most of the time. Less than ten per cent of consumers had never had a speedy door-to-door trip using either type of taxi.

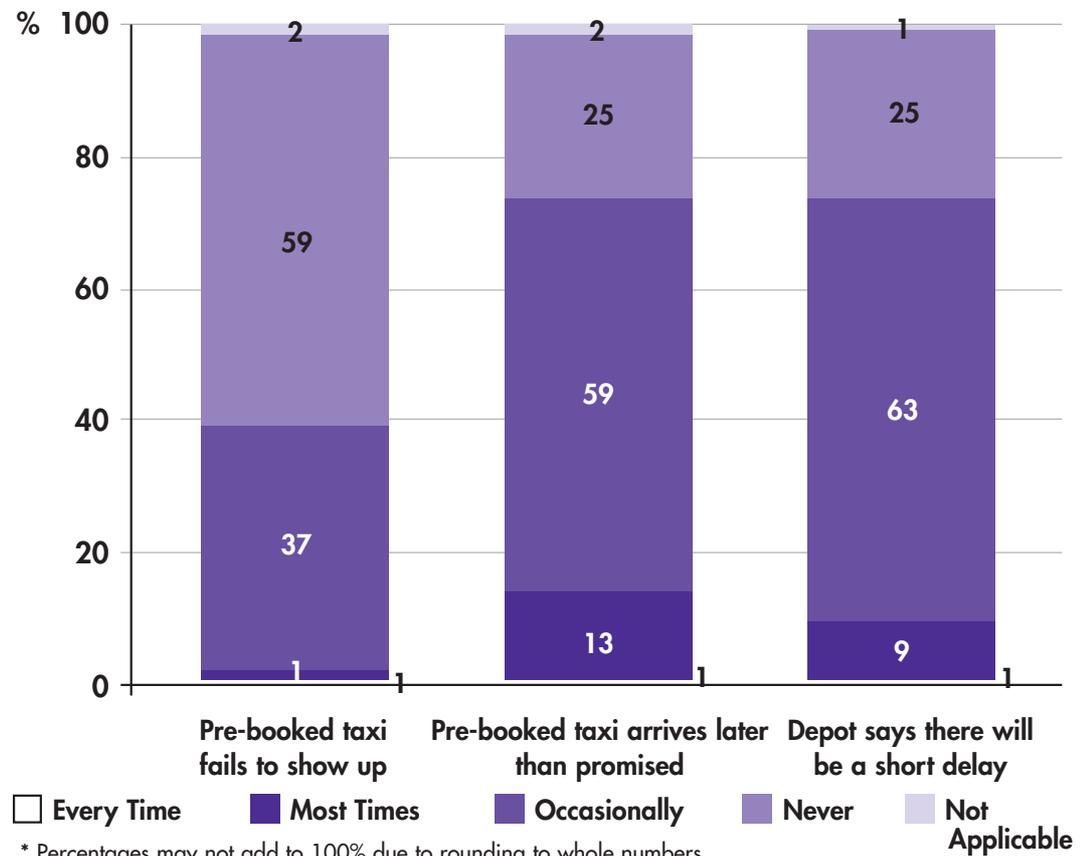
Again, the majority of respondents in both cases had encountered a courteous, helpful driver for most of their taxi journeys. Only two per cent of consumers had never encountered a courteous, helpful private hire taxi driver and only four per cent of consumers had never encountered a courteous, helpful driver in a public hire taxi. Both types of taxis were deemed to have comfortable seats and journeys as well as clean vehicle interiors.

Talking about taxis

PRIVATE HIRE TAXI CONCERNS

Of the consumers who use private hire taxis at least once a year, three out of four (73 per cent) have been told by a taxi depot that there will be a delay for a taxi. Another problem consumers face is poor timekeeping, again three quarters (73 per cent) of consumers thought taxis arrived later than promised every time, most times or occasionally. Four out of ten (39 per cent) consumers had also experienced a pre-booked taxi failing to turn up at all (refer to figure 10). These figures reflect findings in our earlier research.

Figure 10 – Performance indicators for private hire taxis



PUBLIC HIRE TAXI CONCERNS

Over three-quarters (78 per cent) of consumers who use public hire taxis reported a long wait at the taxi rank or on the street occasionally or most of the time. Only 22 per cent of consumers have never had a long wait for a public hire taxi.

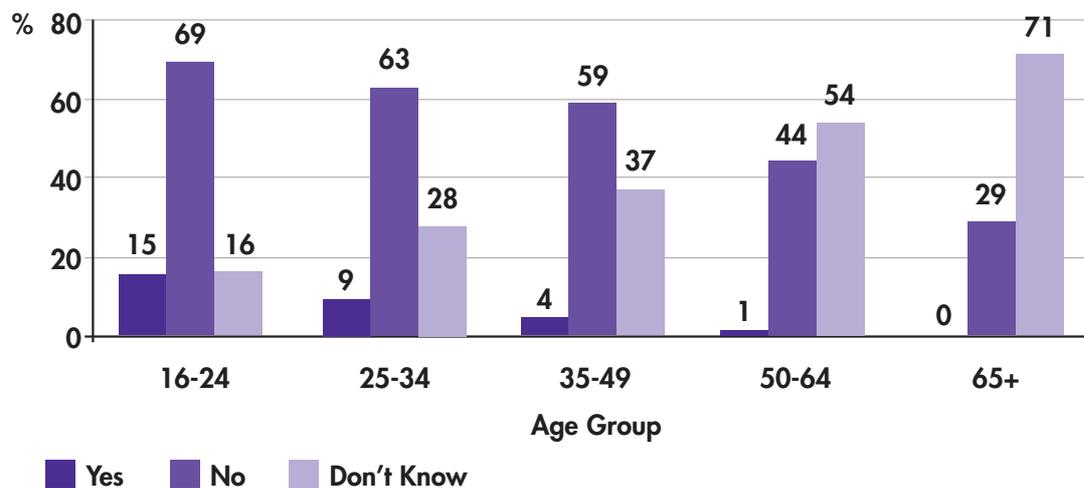
REASONS FOR NOT USING TAXIS

All those consumers who never or rarely use either public or private hire taxis were asked their reasons for not using taxis. The main reason was that they do not need to. They either own a car or have access to other adequate transport. Another reason consumers do not use a public hire taxi is that they simply do not operate in the areas where consumers want to travel. Public hire taxis only operate in Belfast and certain parts of Northern Ireland and so are not available to all consumers. Black taxis or taxi buses are also only available on certain routes in north and west Belfast.

LEGAL / SAFETY CONCERNS

Five per cent of this survey had encountered an unlicensed taxi in the past three months. Young consumers had encountered unlicensed taxis more than older age groups, 24 per cent of those aged under 35 years had encountered an unlicensed taxi compared to only 5 per cent of those aged over 35 years (refer to figure 11). Although a large number of consumers from the older age groups answered, they did not know whether or not they have encountered an unlicensed taxi.

Figure 11 – Consumers who have encountered an unlicensed taxi within the last three months



It is also illegal for private hire taxis to ply for trade (ie be hailed) and from the results, more private hire taxis were hailed or flagged down than public hire (refer to figure 12). It is also important to note that almost one in every ten (8 per cent) of people who hailed a taxi were unsure which type it was. The results would suggest that there is significant flouting of the law by private hire taxi operators.

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Figure 12 – The type of taxi flagged down by consumers

Type of taxi flagged down	Count of respondents
Public hire only	16
Private hire only	53
Both public and private hire	11
Not sure which	8

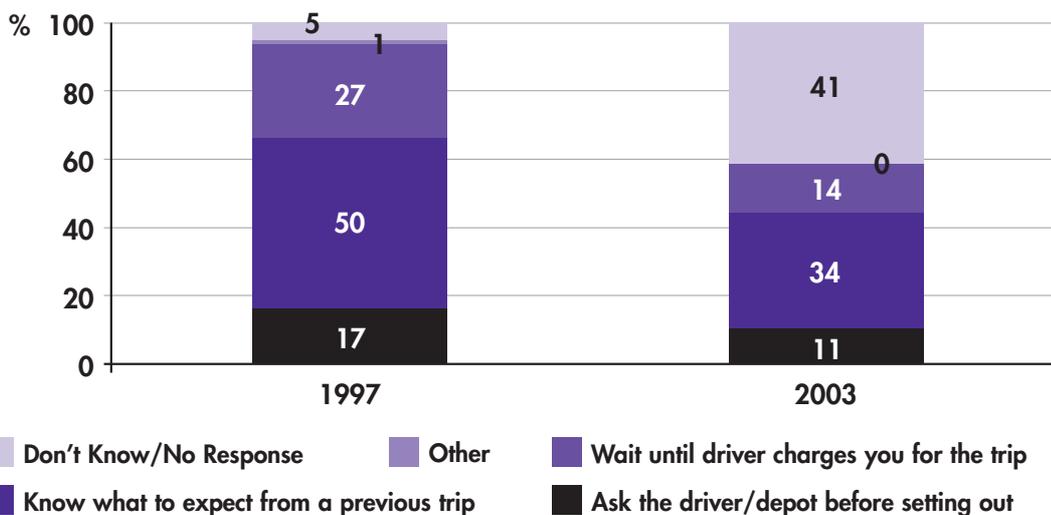
FINDING OUT ABOUT THE FARE

Half of the consumers (50 per cent) in 1997 knew what to expect the fare to be from previous trips (refer to figure 13). In 2003, this has fallen to just over one third of consumers, this may mean consumers are facing constantly changing fares making it difficult to know what to expect.

Only one in ten consumers (11 per cent) ask the price of the journey before setting out. If the cost is not established beforehand, overcharging can become an issue. Establishing the cost before the journey is also made more difficult with the installation of meters. This may no longer allow consumers to shop around for the lowest price before taking a taxi journey. However, the percentage of respondents who find out the price of the fare by waiting until the driver asks for the money, has halved since 1997.

Worryingly, the results also reveal that 41 per cent of consumers do not know how they normally find out the fare.

Figure 13 – How consumers find out about the fare

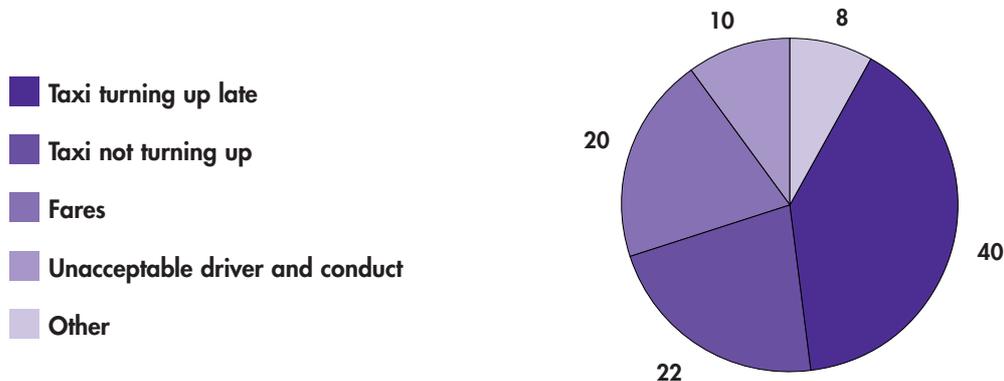


CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS

One in ten (10 per cent) consumers have had a reason to make a complaint about taxis. A slightly higher number of men and younger consumers had reason to complain. Two-fifths (41 per cent) of respondents did not know if they had any reason to complain.

In 62 per cent of the most recent cases, the cause for complaint was the taxi showing up late or not showing up at all (refer to figure 14). This compares to just over half of complaints (51 per cent) in the 1997 survey relating to the same reason. The cause for complaints regarding the fare has fallen from 27 per cent in 1997 to 20 per cent in 2003.

Figure 14 – Consumers' most recent cause for complaint



ACTION TAKEN

Two-thirds (66 per cent) of consumers who had reason for making a complaint did follow it up. Although young consumers were more likely to have reason to complain, they were less likely to make a complaint about it. Only six out of ten (64 per cent) aged under 35 years who had a reason to make a complaint actually followed it up compared to eight out of ten (80 per cent) of those aged over 35 years.

The most popular place to make the complaint to was the company involved (39 per cent). A quarter (25 per cent) of complaints were made to the taxi driver and four per cent of complainants felt the complaint was severe enough to involve the police. No one surveyed had made a complaint to the Department of the Environment.

Worryingly, in two-fifths (42 per cent) of complaints, nothing happened as a result of the complaint, slightly less than in 1997 when half the complainants reported nothing happened following their complaint. Of those who got resolutions these included: refunds, explanations and almost a quarter of cases resulted in an apology (see figure 15).

Talking about taxis

Figure 15 - Outcome of Complaints

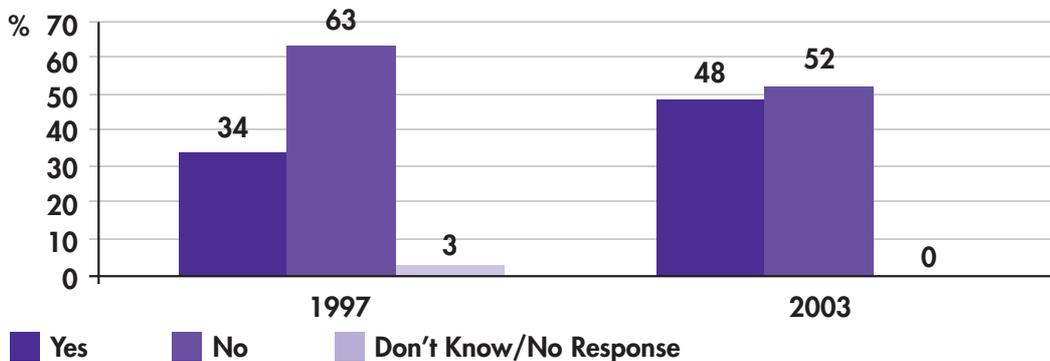
Complainants outcome	% of respondents who had a complaint
Nothing	42
Refund	6
Complimentary trip	3
Apology	23
Explanation	5
Other	21

Of the consumers who did complain, less than half (48 per cent) were satisfied with the outcome. While this is an improvement from 1997 when only a third (34 per cent) were satisfied with the outcome of their complaint, this still needs improvement (refer to figure 16).

The reasons consumers gave for not complaining included:

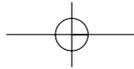
- Unlikely to get satisfaction
- Couldn't be bothered
- Don't like complaining or being a moan

Figure 16 – Was the complaint outcome satisfactory?



CONSUMERS WITH DISABILITIES

Qualitative research would indicate that taxis are an extremely important mode of transport for disabled consumers. This is because they provide a flexible door-to-door service. Sixteen per cent of respondents from the DoE survey reported to have a physical disability or long standing health problems, which makes it difficult for them to go out on foot (or use buses or cars). Out of the 16 per cent of those suffering from a physical disability, 87 per cent did not own a car



and four out of ten respondents were aged 65 and over. This is a significant potential market for taxi services.

The qualitative research would indicate that when using taxi services, consumers with disabilities face key barriers such as availability, higher charges, lack of information and safety concerns. People with disabilities, especially those who require an accessible vehicle, often find it difficult to get a taxi when they want to travel. This may be because there is a lack of accessible vehicles in their area or those that are in operation are carrying out contract work. Another reported problem is that the drivers of some accessible vehicles may be unwilling or untrained to take a disabled person and would rather carry non-disabled passengers. Many drivers don't understand the particular needs of passengers with disabilities.

From feedback from consumers with disabilities, there is also a general perception that disabled people pay higher than average taxi fares. This could result from an extra charge for carrying mobility equipment or a higher charge for using an accessible vehicle. There is also anecdotal evidence that there are common problems with regard to safety. These include drivers not having the proper equipment or not knowing how to use it properly.

MAKING A COMPLAINT

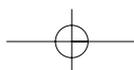
If dissatisfied with a taxi operator, the consumer wants redress. As the survey shows, this process is not well developed at present.

If the driver refuses to respond to a complaint, the passenger can approach the depot owner in the case of private hire service. The depot owner often will investigate and try to resolve the complaint, although the depot does not have a contractual relationship with the customer.

The Department of the Environment is the relevant authority in Northern Ireland and as such licenses taxi drivers and taxi vehicles through Driver and Vehicle Licensing Northern Ireland's (DVLNI) and Road Transport Licensing Division (RTLTD). RTLTD will investigate any complaint made against a licensed taxi driver and where appropriate will call him for interview. Suspension or revocation of a license can result but in some cases a warning letter will suffice.

Complaints should be addressed to:

The Licensing Officer
Taxi Licensing Section
Road Transport Licensing Division
148-158 Corporation Street
Belfast BT1 3DH



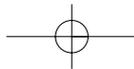
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TIPS ON COMPLAINING

- Make your complaint as soon as possible.
- Plan what you want to say.
- Provide information such as the driver's identification and time and location of the trip.
- Be polite and speak clearly and firmly.
- Stay calm.
- Don't make a fist, point your finger or get aggressive.
- Be persistent.
- Complain in writing if you don't get satisfaction at first.
- Keep records of letters, telephone calls, receipts and bills.
- Don't forget to say thank you if your complaint is handled well.

HOW TO GET A FARE DEAL

- Belfast Public Hire taxis are the only sector of the industry where fares are regulated. For journeys outside this area, it is advised to request an estimated cost for the journey at the time of booking or prior to boarding the taxi.
- As well as asking what the fare is before booking the service, also check the price with the driver.
- Ask when the booked taxi can be expected to arrive.
- Anticipate demand for service, by pre-booking and checking prices at busy times such as New Year.
- Look for proper identification of the vehicle and the driver before departing.
- When possible, build up a relationship with a taxi company that provides a good service.



APPENDIX A

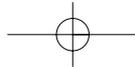
Explanation of socio-economic groupings:

- AB - Professional and managerial.
- C1 - Skilled non-manual.
- C2 - Skilled manual.
- DE - Semi-skilled, unskilled and others.

Explanation of Areas

Area	District Councils.
Belfast	Belfast.
East of Province	Antrim, Ards, Ballymena, Banbridge, Carrick, Castlereagh, Craigavon, Down, Larne, Lisburn, Newtownabbey, North Down.
West of Province	Armagh, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Cookstown, Dungannon, Fermanagh, Limavady, Derry, Magherafelt, Moyle, Newry and Mourne, Omagh, Strabane.





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