

'Framework needed' for third-party taxi apps

Taxi body's exec adviser says package of policies could level playing field for cabbies

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The National Taxi Association's executive adviser hopes to see a set of operating procedures or a framework that governs how third-party taxi-booking apps and their private-hire drivers operate, to level the playing field between them and taxi drivers.

Mr Ang Hin Kee, who is also an

MP for Ang Mo Kio GRC, told The Straits Times this yesterday, in response to a blog post by Transport Minister Khaw Boon Wan.

The Land Transport Authority is studying whether to make private-hire drivers get vocational licences, but Mr Ang noted that that might not be the eventual decision taken by the Government. Rather, the solution could come from "a package of policies", he said.

He said commuters needed to

know whether they would be covered by insurance in the event of accidents, and should have avenues for disputing charges and unsatisfactory service.

Said Mr Ang: "We've already assembled some info and comments from taxi drivers, so the first thing to do is try and organise a dialogue with Mr Ng (Chee Meng) and share with him the concerns that have been raised."

Last Friday, Mr Khaw blogged that he had tasked Senior Minister of State for Transport Ng Chee Meng to study if private-hire drivers had an unfair advantage over taxi drivers since they "do not need

a vocational licence".

This was after he had received feedback from taxi drivers that "UberX is unfair". His ministry would "where justified... level the playing field", he wrote. UberX is a private-hire chauffeur service that can be booked via the Uber app.

Taxi driver Jaya Ananda, 64, points out that these private-hire drivers are not subject to the same requirements as cabbies.

For instance, he has seen foreigners sign up with Uber, when only Singaporeans can hold vocational taxi driver licences. The taxi industry should remain a protected one for Singaporeans, he added.

Mobile apps for on demand private-hire services such as Uber and GrabCar have grown in popularity in recent years as an alternative to conventional taxis.

In a statement, an Uber spokesman said it was looking forward to continuing its ongoing dialogue with the Government. "Uber has helped thousands of Singaporeans... become thriving driver entrepreneurs using our platform," he said.

Uber drivers said it would be unfair if they were regulated as they were not strictly offering a taxi service. "If we have to get vocational licences, but they allow us to pick up street hires - then I think it would be fair," said Mr Ken Wong, 30.

Another Uber driver, Mr S.K. Low, 54, said he did not think there was a "conflict of interest between Uber services and taxis".

"We cannot take street hires, neither can we go to taxi stands and tout. We rely completely on the app - it's a willing buyer, willing seller situation," he said.

Mr Low added that if anything, the Government could study how to make pricing more even. He estimated that UberX is about 20 per

cent cheaper than taxis, but this meant drivers like him had meagre takings and had to work long hours.

Meanwhile, consumers cautioned against a heavy-handed approach, with many saying online that these third-party apps should not be unfairly penalised.

"If people are going to Uber, it means that the Uber business model is better. So why is the Government trying to help (the taxi operators) when they should be trying to improve their business model?" said financial analyst Dez Tan, 29.

Recruiter April Hoon, 27, pointed out that these apps both created jobs for drivers and provided options for commuters.

National University of Singapore transport researcher Lee Der Horng reckons what is really needed is an one-stop taxi-booking platform that aggregates both third party and taxi services. Calling it a "white knight" solution, Professor Lee said: "Commuters can just go to this app, see all the choices available to them, and then make a decision."

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