

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of a Meeting between Members, Taxi Proprietors and Officers held at Knowle, Sidmouth on Wednesday, 28 October 2008

Present:

Councillors:

Christine Drew (Chairman)

Graham Godbeer (Vice Chairman)

Brian Bailey – AJ's Taxis

Kyle Dean – Dean's Taxis

Niel Duck – Abacus Taxis

Kevin Hempstead – First Call

Alan Hill – AJ's Taxis (Exmouth Taxi Association)

John Huffer – Horseshoe Taxis (East Devon Taxi Association)

Dave Lean – Viking Cabs (Exmouth Taxi Association)

Nina Peters – Sid Valley Cars

Jason Saxton – Swift Cars

Philip Thomas – Lympstone Private Hire

Richard Wyatt – Horseshoe Taxis

John Tippin – Licensing Manager

Douglas Jackson – Licensing Officer

John Loveridge – Licensing Officer

Rachel Perram – Democratic Services Officer

The meeting started at 2.05pm and finished at 3.52pm.

***23 Apologies**

Apologies were received from Phil Williams, Exmouth Taxi Owners and Drivers Association and Len Wright, Car Park Services Manager.

***24 Report of last meeting**

The report of the meeting held on 21 May 2008 was received as signed as a true record.

***25 Matters Arising**

National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) for the Taxi Trade (Minute no. *20)

A member of the taxi trade reported that that NVQ training would become compulsory for bus drivers in the future and enquired if there were any plans for this or a similar qualification to be made compulsory for the taxi trade. The Licensing Manager advised that to-date no such requirement for taxi drivers had been reported to the District Council and he knew of no plans to do so.

*26 **Parking on taxi ranks and enforcement of the problem**

The Chairman welcomed John Lacey, Assistant Car Park Services Manager to the meeting.

The Assistant Car Park Services Manager advised that there are 4 Civil Enforcement Officers (CEO) on duty every week day in Exmouth from 8:00 – 18:00 (with a minimum of 2 officers on the streets at all times). Outside these hours the Police can issue fixed penalty notices to vehicles that are unlawfully parked.

In other towns in the district – such as Seaton and Honiton, there are a minimum of two officers on duty during the above hours.

The Assistant Manager stated that he could be contacted 7 days per week on 07734 568823.

The Assistant Manager was advised that the Taxi Rank signs on the top rank (outside Fulfords Estate Agents) in Sidmouth had been turned around, so that the sign was no longer visible. This had therefore become a problem spot as the public had been parking there. Drivers were advised that any problems such as these should be reported to CEO officers in daytime and the police at evenings and weekends.

John Huffer from the East Devon Taxi Association reported that the CEOs in Honiton were excellent and very supportive. However, it appears that officers are not permitted to prosecute drivers that choose to park in the Honiton taxi rank, due to problems with out-dated traffic orders. This had become exacerbated by the recent opening of a betting shop next to the rank.

The Assistant Manager confirmed this to be the case as there were historical problems with the Parking Act in this area of Honiton. Devon County Council (DCC) was aware of this matter and was working to amend their orders in a number of places in East Devon.

Brian Bailey from the Exmouth Taxi Drivers' Association highlighted a number of trouble spots in Exmouth town centre, some caused by numbers of disabled drivers parking on double yellow lines and others where regularly parked police and emergency vehicles were causing visibility problems.

The Assistant Manager advised the committee that on seeing an illegally parked vehicle, the CEOs had an observation period of five minutes before issuing a ticket. It was noted that by giving drivers this period of time, there were fewer appeals against parking fines.

It was confirmed that parking in a taxi rank by any vehicle other than a taxi was a prosecutable offence – this included disabled driver vehicles. CEOs could not issue tickets for highway obstruction or dangerous positioning – this was a police matter.

In response to a report of a market trader in Honiton who was parking his vehicle in the taxi rank, the Licensing Manager offered to contact the Market Inspector.

ACTION that the Licensing Manager contact the Market Inspector for Honiton to report the market trader and discuss a solution to the problem of obstructions in the taxi rank.

*27 **Police duty and policy for late night crowd control in Exmouth**

The Strand area of Exmouth was a trouble spot for all at night. Taxi drivers were increasingly concerned at the level of violence, ill feeling and late night problems caused by revelers in the area.

The Chairman advised the meeting that she had been accompanied a Licensing Officer until 3am in order to see the problems in the area first hand. Time had been spent with the police and the CCTV unit. The evening had been an eye opener as to the issues faced in the town as well as the good work being carried out to monitor and control possible trouble spots. The Chairman spoke to both the Sergeant and Superintendent at Exmouth Police Station, who were concerned to hear of the taxi drivers' problems and promised to give them more support. The meeting was advised that the taxi rank was clearly on display in the CCTV control room and that any problems could be seen and available resource dispatched to deal with a situation.

Dave Lean, Exmouth Taxi Proprietors and Drivers Association advised the meeting that he had received a number of complaints from taxi drivers regarding the police, who were regularly seen to be sitting in their vehicles at night, rather than patrolling the area around the Strand. It was understood that there was often a police dog with them that rarely went on patrol. The meeting agreed that when dogs were used on patrol that this served as an excellent crowd calmer.

The drivers expressed their concern over the diminishing availability of police officers as the night progressed. It was confirmed that the Exmouth Custody Centre had limited capacity and those prisoners who were not likely to be released quickly had to be taken to the Exeter Custody Centre which typically involved a 2 hour round trip for officers. This clearly became a massive resource issue on nights where there were high rates of problems in the area.

The Chairman confirmed that she had written to voice the concerns over resource issues and had been informed that there would be two additional beat officers allocated to the district. In addition, the police had promised to send a beat officer to attend the Exmouth Taxi Proprietors and Drivers' Association meetings. The Chairman asked to be advised if the officers did not attend, so that this could be followed up.

New Year's Eve

The meeting discussed possible arrangements for crowd control in Exmouth for the forthcoming celebrations. Drivers wanted to have police officers present to control the crowds at the Strand taxi rank. Previous measures such as trained security staff had not been particularly successful. A proposal to consider taxi rank marshals (as used by several other problem towns in the country), was also dismissed by the drivers.

ACTION that the Exmouth Taxi Proprietors and Drivers' Association advise the Exmouth Police Beat Officer of dates for their forthcoming meetings.

*28 **Lack of overnight toilet facilities in Exmouth**

The Licensing Officer, Douglas Jackson, advised the meeting that all public toilets in the district were locked at 7pm. The relatively early closing time had been in response to the repeated vandalism of facilities.

However EDDC's Street Scene were able to sell drivers a 'Radar' key, at a nominal charge, which would afford access to various disabled toilet facilities throughout the district and also the rest of England. Drivers were relieved to hear this news.

Lack of overnight toilet facilities in Exmouth continued...

The meeting discussed the issue of the chronic lack of public toilet facilities at night. Further to a request for an update on the possibility of fitting a 'pop-up' urinal (as available in Newquay at night), the Licensing Officer advised that the cost of such a facility was estimated by Street Scene to be in the region of £125,000 to fit. As Exmouth was scheduled to be subject to massive regeneration in the Strand area, such a permanent facility fitted at this stage, was probably premature.

ACTION that the Licensing Manager will investigate the possibility of temporary open urinals for the Strand for New Year's Eve, as supplied on a previous occasion.

***29 Progress report on taxi ranks for Seaton and Honiton**

The Chairman advised that Paul Wilson from Devon County Council would be unable to attend the meeting as he had a prior engagement and had not noted his invitation to attend the Knowle.

The Licensing Officer, Douglas Jackson, advised that since receiving a letter from DCC on 18 August 2008, there had not been any progress in respect of taxi ranks for Seaton and Honiton. EDDC were still waiting for action on matters connected with these ranks. It was understood that some issues had arisen with DCC in connection with the changeover from Traffic Wardens to Civil Enforcement Officers, and that this had caused a delay to the amendments in traffic orders. It was hoped that these changes would be ready so that they could be advertised before Christmas and be ready for implementation in the New Year 2009.

The meeting was assured that EDDC would continue to pursue this matter.

The Licensing Officer had attended a site meeting with Paul Wilson 12 months ago, where sites had been identified in Honiton for further taxi rank provision. However, to date DCC had failed to produce plans for consultation with taxi drivers. Again, these were being chased with DCC.

Despite the fact that Honiton had 24 taxi drivers at present, and only 2 spaces on a taxi rank, the meeting was pleased to note that the Town Council were being very supportive of their problems.

ACTIONS

1. that the Licensing Officer would continue to try to progress traffic order amendments and taxi ranks for Seaton and Honiton with DCC.
2. that the Chairman would ask for an item on this subject to be included on the next meeting of the Highways and Traffic Orders Committee (HATOC).

***30 Department of Transport (DoT) guidance for safety of Hackney & Private Hire drivers (15 October 2008)**

The Licensing Officer, Douglas Jackson, advised the meeting that the Department of Transport had issued guidance notes for the safety of drivers on 15 October 2008. The notes were informative and the link to their website for copies was www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/crime/taxiphv/.

***31 Performing Rights Society – need for licence in taxi and private hire vehicles**

The Licensing Officer, Douglas Jackson, advised the meeting that the Performing Rights Society (PRS) have stated that drivers who take fare paying passengers need to have a license to play music in their vehicles. The PRS have their own officers to carry out inspections of businesses, in order to ensure that licenses are purchased. The cost of the license was under £40, with taxis and private hire vehicles being on the lowest banding for license fees.

A driver informed the meeting that if requested by a PRS officer to purchase a license, a request should be made of the PRS to provide a full written list of all the artists that they represent. Upon receipt of the list, the driver could avoid paying a fee by agreeing not to play any music produced by those artists.

***32 Hackney Carriage fares**

John Huffer, East Devon Taxi Association, presented this item. The Licensing Officers were commended for their assistance in the tariff changes that took place at the end of 2007. However it was fair to say that all drivers were keen to avoid a repeat performance of the last very high increase – which was due to a gap of three years elapsing between that and the previous rise. The level of increases had taken customers by surprise. The drivers wanted the next increase to be at a modest but more regular in interval.

Mr Huffer went through the various price fluctuations that had occurred in diesel over the past year. He stated that useful comparisons could be drawn between similar districts, such as South Somerset with its similar demographics and topographies to East Devon.

He went on to say that overheads for drivers and taxi firms were noted to be ever increasing, such as accountancy fees. The requirement to meet stringent Government guidelines was ever more onerous on small companies.

He commended a revised rate that was much in line with South Somerset.

The Licensing Manager advised that the proposal was to bring Hackney Carriage fares to the meeting of the Licensing Committee on 1 December. It was noted that EDDC had not had a fares increase during 2008, a number of other councils had raised their fees during the year.

EDDC's fares were currently in the middle of the league table for all councils in the South West. The Licensing Manager emphasised the need for the taxi companies to come to the Council with a proposal for fare increases that could be discussed at the Licensing meeting in December.

Hackney Carriage fares continued...

The Licensing Manager explained that an option that the Licensing and Enforcement Committee could consider was an increase based on RPI for the period however some of those present felt this was a somewhat complex figure that included many factors that may not be of relevance to the taxi and private hire trade. The Council was keen to set an equitable fares structure that permitted companies to remain solvent in hard economic times. The Licensing Manager advised that any proposals for rate increases to be considered by the next meeting of the Licensing and Enforcement Committee would need to be finalised within the next two weeks in order to meet the meeting report deadline of 14 November 2008.

ACTION that the Licensing Manager meet with drivers on the afternoon of Wednesday 5 November for a Rates Proposal meeting.

RECOMMENDED that there be a review of fares on an annual basis from December 2008.

*33 **Next meeting**

16 April 2009, 2.00pm, Council Chamber, Knowle.