

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of a Meeting between Members, Taxi Proprietors and Officers held at Knowle, Sidmouth on Wednesday, 21 May 2008

Present:

Councillors:

Christine Drew (Chairman)

Graham Godbeer (Vice Chairman)

Mr A Hill – AJ's Taxis

Mr J Huffer – Horseshoe Taxis

Mr R Crofts – Ocean Cabs

Mr G Kent

Mr P Johnson

Mr G France

Mr B Newman

Mr J Tucker

Mr B Bailey

Mr G Marles

John Tippin – Licensing Manager

Douglas Jackson – Licensing Officer

John Loveridge – Licensing Officer

Hannah Jarvis – Democratic Services Support Officer

The meeting commenced at 2.05pm and terminated at 4.00pm.

***9 Apologies**

Apologies were received from Alan Tweed and Mary Wickes.

***10 Report of last meeting**

The report of the meeting held on 4 October 2007 was received as a correct record subject to the spelling of Mr France's surname being corrected and his wife being deleted from the list of apologies.

The Licensing Manager reported updates following the last meeting.

Minute *2 – Hackney Carriage Fare Table

The Licensing Manager reported the new fares had been introduced on 14 December 2007.

Minute *3 – Taxi Licensing Policy

The update of the Taxi Licensing Policy was ongoing and once completed it would be published for consultation.

Minute *4 - Taxi Ranks

The Licensing Manager reported he would be revisiting the issue later in the meeting. Further discussions had taken place with Devon County Highways, but as yet no progress

*10 **Report of last meeting cont ...**

had been made. A letter had been prepared to send to Tony Mathews at Devon County Highways.

Minute *7 – Future Meetings

It was asked whether future meetings could be held during school holidays to allow those drivers on school contracts to attend.

Minute *8 – Vehicle Plates

Drivers plying for hire with their plates inside the vehicle had been dealt with.

Minute *8 - Badges

New badges issues by East Devon District Council would no longer have drivers' home addresses printed on the back.

ACTIONS

that where possible future meetings be arranged during the school holidays

*11 **Hackney Carriage Fares**

The Licensing Manager reported the Hackney Carriage Fares had been increased on 14 December 2007 and asked those in attendance for comments. The taxi proprietors felt because the fares had not been revised for a long time it had meant a big increase for passengers. Increasing the fares a small percentage each year was felt to be better for passengers. A taxi proprietor stated by the time the fares were revised in December, a number of Hackney Carriage proprietors would be out of business, due to the rise in fuel prices. The Licensing Manager advised that to review the fares more frequently than 12 months would be too costly, due to having to advertise.

A taxi proprietor asked that consideration be given to reviewing the fares every 12 months. The Chairman advised she would take the suggestion forward and have it put on a future agenda for the full Licensing and Enforcement Committee.

John Huffer reported that at the last meeting between Members, Taxi Proprietors and Officers, held in October, it had been anticipated that over the next 18 months the price of fuel per litre would average out at around £1.15. However on the day the increased Hackney Carriage Fares were introduced the prices on the petrol station forecourts had already reached £1.15 per litre. Seven months following the meeting the price per litre on the average forecourt was £1.30. It was felt to be impossible to predict what the price of fuel would be by Christmas. The Licensing Manager advised that unless there were any dramatic changes to fuel prices the Hackney Carriage Fare Table would remain as it was.

A taxi proprietor asked whether a mechanism could be put in place so if fuel prices went above a certain level an increase could be made to the taxi metres. The Licensing Manager advised research had been carried out on this suggestion and he had been unable to find anywhere that had this mechanism in place. Further investigation was needed, as legally the fares had to go to the Licensing and Enforcement Committee for approval and then be advertised to allow the public to object.

Charging a booking fee was suggested as a way of helping to counter balance the rising fuel prices. Up to £10 could legally be charged by those who took phone bookings. This fee could not be charged by those who picked up from taxi ranks. The customer was to be informed of the booking fee when the booking was made.

***11 Hackney Carriage Fares cont ...**

Introducing the changes to the fares before Christmas was felt to be of benefit, as it allowed passengers to become familiar with the new fares before the New Year.

The Licensing Manager reported that in the national fare league table published by the Private Hire and Taxi monthly magazine, East Devon District Council's fares were rated 44th highest out of 375 Councils in the table.

ACTIONS

1. that the introduction of a fuel surcharge be investigated and discussed at a future meeting
2. that the suggestion of a 12 monthly review of the Hackney Carriage Fares be put on a future agenda for the full Licensing and Enforcement Committee to consider

***12 Taxi Licensing Fees**

The Licensing Manager reported the Taxi Licensing Fees had been advertised to increase with January's inflation rate, an increase of 4.1%. Notices had gone out, and fees had been advertised in local newspapers. The period for objection was to end 22 May 2008. The fee for vehicle licences was £221 and the fee for a driver's licence was £88.

The Licensing Manager advised the law stated costs had to be recovered in fees and the inflation rate equated to what was needed to balance the books. A profit could not be made by the Council.

***13 Taxi rank issues including rank etiquette**

The Licensing Manager advised that the agenda item had been raised by Mary Wickes, who was unable to attend the meeting; however she had forwarded her concern to the Licensing Department. The issue was that taxi drivers were not always moving down the ranks and were leaving large gaps. It was felt that the problem had increased since the smoking ban, as drivers now had to get out of their vehicles to smoke. The Licensing Manager advised he would be publishing a newsletter with this issue to be included to make sure all drivers were aware that they should be moving down the ranks and not leaving large gaps.

Mr France reported there had been an ongoing problem with unlicensed vehicles parking in the one double taxi rank in Ottery St Mary. From the beginning of May 2008 it was Civil Parking Officers responsibility to enforce the law with respect to taxi ranks; however it was acknowledged that there had been a gap in the service during the take over period. It was felt that the need for enforcement should be brought to the Civil Parking Officers attention. The working hours of the Civil Parking Officers was queried. This information was unknown but would be looked into by the Licensing Manger. Licensing Officers did not have the authority to move unlicensed vehicles on; however drivers should inform Licensing Officers of places and times where this was happening, so the information could be passed on the Civil Parking Officers. A suggestion was made that the person responsible for the Civil Parking Officers should attend the next consultation committee for them to explain their remit and give them the opportunity to fully understand the issues/concerns of the taxi trade.

*13 **Taxi rank issues including rank etiquette cont ...**

A taxi proprietor asked whether the Licensing Enforcement Team could approach the police to cover taxi ranks in the evenings. There was felt to be a particular problem in the Exmouth area with a lack of Taxi Wardens. The Licensing Manager advised that due to limited funding it was likely that Taxi Wardens would only be used during busy times of the year. The Chairman advised she would write a letter to the Chief of Police to raise the concerns for safety in the Exmouth area.

ACTIONS

1. that the Licensing Manager include the issue of taxi rank etiquette in the next newsletter
2. that the person responsible for Civil Parking Officers be invited to the next consultation meeting to outline their remit and responsibilities
3. that the Chairman write a letter to the Chief of Police regarding the concerns raised for the safety of those working in the taxi trade in the Exmouth area late at night

*14 **Taxi Driver Licenses – 1 year versus 3 years**

The Licensing Manager reported the agenda item had been raised by Alan Tweed, who was unable to attend the meeting. He had suggested that the Council renew the Taxi Driver Licences every 3 years rather than 12 monthly. The Licensing Manager stated legally they could be renewed every 3 years; however there was no requirement for drivers to tell the Council of any convictions or medical problems and therefore these were often only discovered on renewal of a licence. Three years was felt to be a long time for this to go undeclared. There was also concern that the insurance cover could be invalidated. There was no penalty for non disclosure. After some discussion it was agreed that the issuing of licences should remain as it was.

ACTIONS

that no change be made to change the annual renewal of Taxi Driver's Licenses to 3 yearly

*15 **What is a Taxi?**

John Huffer reported better guidance was needed on the vehicles the Licensing and Enforcement Committee would approve as a Hackney Carriage. It was felt to be impractical for taxi proprietors to wait 6 weeks for the Committee to make a decision. The Licensing Manager advised guidelines were in place however there was room for these to be tightened. The Taxi Licensing policy was being updated and clarified and this issue would be taken into consideration as well as any fresh Government advice. The Licensing Manager stated the local authority needed to be sure the vehicle being licensed was suitable for the task. Any vehicle that was unusual or of a type not previously licensed by the authority might need to be inspected by the Licensing and Enforcement Committee for seating capacity and access.

The Licensing Manager reported that East Devon District Council had one of the lowest minimum engine sizes compared with other Councils.

ACTION

that this issue be addressed during the preparation of the Council's new Taxi Licensing Policy

*16 **Vehicle Age Limits** (Minute *6 refers)

The Licensing Manager reported the issue of vehicle age limits had been discussed at the last meeting and there was little more to add. Vehicle age limits would be referred to in the Taxi Licensing Policy.

*17 **Disability Discrimination Act**

The Licensing Officer (Mr Jackson) reported the Department of Transport had again put on hold all plans for the introduction of disabled friendly vehicles and there had been no suggestion made as to when it would be looked at again. The Licensing Service would notify the taxi proprietors should the situation change.

*18 **Smoking Ban**

The Licensing Officer (Mr Jackson) reported one driver had been caught smoking in his vehicle since the smoking ban had been introduced, but otherwise it was pleasing to see that the trade was complying with the new legislation. Drivers were reminded there needed to be a visible sticker in every compartment.

*19 **Employment of Migrant Workers**

The Licensing Officer advised taxi proprietors there were huge fines for employing migrant workers who were in the country illegally. It was the duty of the employer to ensure the right documents were in place before employing a migrant worker. A handout was available on the employment of migrant workers through the Home Office website, www.homeoffice.gov.uk.

*20 **NVQ for the Taxi Trade**

East Devon District Council had been approached by Skills UK, to offer NVQ training to those taxi drivers who were interested in achieving the qualification. The Licensing Officer stated it was not compulsory and there were no plans to make it so. The course was often fully funded with a qualification on completion. The NVQ would cover topics such as health and safety, how to treat passengers, and helping passengers with special needs. Those interested were invited to put their name forward to the Licensing Officer who would pass it on to a Skills UK co-ordinator.

*21 **Green Issues including:**

a) How green is my Taxi?

John Huffer had asked for the item to be on the agenda but felt this issue had been covered in the discussion on what is a taxi (Minute *15). Clearer guidelines were needed from the Council.

b) Reduced fees for green taxis

The issue had been raised by Alan Tweed who had been unable to attend the meeting. The Licensing Manager reported the charging of a reduced fee for disabled friendly taxis had been investigated and similar issues would apply in the case of reduced licensing fees for green vehicles. The fees taken by the Council were to cover administration and

b) Reduced fees for green taxis cont...

enforcement costs and if the Licensing Department were to reduce the fees for green taxis it would mean increasing the fees for the rest to ensure costs were met. This was likely to be challenged and as a result it was felt to be too complex. Fees for taxi licensing were to be left as they were.

ACTION that no change be made to the Council's fee structure to allow a lesser charge to be made for green taxis

*22 **Any other business**

A taxi proprietor asked whether the "seven day contract" provision had been stopped in areas outside of London. The Licensing Manager stated from January this year it was law that all vehicles providing a taxi type service had a licence. Devon County Council had done away with all their seven day contract arrangements, and now all vehicles they used for school transport had to be licensed as Hackney Carriage or Private Hire. If there was any suspicion or information relating to a breach of this legislation it should be brought to the attention of the Licensing Department who would investigate.