

Taxi Licensing Task and Finish Group – 9 September 2019 at 6.15pm

Meeting Notes

T&F Group Members Present: Chris Bowring, Rachel Burgess, Lindsay Ferris, Jim Frewin and Barrie Patman (Chairman)

Officers Present: Luciane Bowker, Karen Court, Sean Murphy and Julia O'Brien

Trade Members Present: [REDACTED]

1. Confirmation of notes

The notes of the meeting on 9 September 2019 were confirmed as a correct record of the meeting, subject to an amendment to item 5, resolution 5, where it said 'Driver Badge' it should say Vehicle Licence.

2. Apologies for absence

There were no apologies for absence.

3. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Internal Audit Report

Sean Murphy stated that the increase in the hourly rate had been calculated by applying the inflation increase and then rounding up the number. The previous rate was £55 - 2% was added making it £56.20 – this figure was rounded up to £57 for approval by the Licensing and Appeals Committee. He proposed to keep the £57 fee for 20/21.

Sean Murphy stated that the current system was still very manual and archaic, the new online system would come into place in April 2020. He stated that the 5 hours time allocation was historical and should be revisited as per recommendation in the report.

During the discussion of this item the following comments were made:

- Sean Murphy proposed to review the officer time allocation. He stated that there were 280 licences in total in Wokingham;
- [REDACTED] (Trade member) wanted to know if the department was claiming for overtime and how much this was costing;
- [REDACTED] (Trade member) stated that he would like to see the full audit report, without which he could not make informed comments;
- [REDACTED] (Trade member) was disappointed that the report did not include figures;
- Rachel Burgess stated that she agreed with the recommendations contained in the report. She also stated that there was no justification for the increase this year, there was no documentation to demonstrate how the 5 hour had been worked out, and there was no consideration of efficiencies. She believed that the trade should not be penalised;
- Sean Murphy stated that the cost had been previously calculated only based on licensing officers' time, processing time etc. it had not taken into account

- the work of other departments such as IT, HR, Finance etc or the time spent on recording in the public register. This needed to be re-visited;
- Lindsay Ferris stated that if after the review it was established that the fee should be, for example £48; the local authority could decide to refund drivers retrospectively;
 - Sean Murphy acknowledged that there may be a difference between a new licence and a renewal. He stated that it would take approximately two months to undertake a full review of the fees and work out the hourly time, including taking into account the future efficiencies which would result from the introduction of the new system;
 - ██████████ (Trade member) stated that in Manchester the fees were reduced from £150 to £30 as a result of a full audit report. He emphasised that he wanted to see a full audit report, including figures of previous years;
 - Jim Frewin pointed out that a review could also find that the Local Authority had been undercharging;
 - ██████████ (Trade member) asked what savings had been achieved as a result of the service merging with West Berkshire;
 - Sean Murphy stated that the fee was worked out based on time allocation and other costs. He proposed to undertake a review and come back to the T&F Group with the work that the audit report recommended.

Members agreed with Sean Murphy's proposal to bring back a detailed report for discussion at a future meeting of the T&F Group.

RESOLVED That a full review of the fees and officer time allocation will be carried out and brought back to the Task and Finish Group for further discussion.

5. The financial implications on WBC of phasing in the increased charges to the vehicle licence fee, on a 3 year basis

Julia O'Brien stated that there were 280 vehicle licences in Wokingham. The figures depended on what proportion the Members wished to split the extra fee into the old fee of £161 and the new of £282. If this was divided as equally as possible over the next 2 years (to enable the saving over 3 years) for example, this would be £60 and £61, so 280 vehicles x £61 = £17,080 and 280 x £60 = £16,800 so a net loss of £33,880 plus the usual 2 yearly increments over the next 2 years at whatever relevant CPI.

During the discussion of the item the following comments were made:

- Rachel Burgess stated that this represented a small loss in the Council's budget;
- Sean Murphy stated that some local authorities took the decision to subsidise vehicle licences. However, he pointed out that a decision would be needed very soon;
- Rachel Burgess proposed to phase the increase in 3 years, including the current year;
- In response to a question Sean Murphy stated that it was possible to retrospectively refund fees. However, the money for any re-adjustment would have to be found somewhere else, and this was a political decision;
- Barrie Patman stated that this decision should be taken by the Licensing and Appeals Committee;

Members discussed the possibility of subsidising the licences and of phasing the increase. However, they were of the view that no decisions should be made until the review of fees was complete.

RESOLVED That the discussion and decision around phasing out the increase in charges and possibly subsidising vehicle licence fees be put on hold until the full review of fees becomes available.

6. Update on issues raised by the taxi trade

a) Over issuing of hackney licences in Wokingham Borough Council

██████████ (Trade member) stated that there were too many hackney carriage licences in Wokingham, and that there was not enough work for all. He also stated that as a result many drivers had left Wokingham. ██████████ (trade member) agreed with this view, he stated that there was no need to issue any more licences.

Julia O'Brien stated that there was no limit to the number of hackney carriage licences that could be issued by the Local Authority; and in her view there was no case to justify limiting the issuing of licences because the number of licences had been decreasing in Wokingham.

Sean Murphy stated that in order to introduce a limit to the number of licences, a demand survey would have to be carried out (at a cost).

██████████ (Trade member) stated that Reading limited the number of licences they issued. Sean Murphy stated that some local authorities did impose a limit, however, with falling numbers there was no justification to impose a limit, especially given the cost implication of carrying out a survey. Sean Murphy stated that the trade could make a representation stating their case to the Licensing Committee.

██████████ (Trade member) stated that due to the town centre regeneration and traffic, the number of customers had fallen. More people were choosing to go out in Bracknell and Reading instead of Wokingham. Chris Bowring stated that there were also many new houses being built which were going to create more demand. ██████████ (Trade member) stated that the new houses were in the Shinfield area and therefore created work for Reading and not Wokingham.

Members considered that due to the falling numbers of hackney carriage licences, there was no justification to impose a limit. They agreed to re-visit the Local Authority's position if this situation changed.

b) Update on Reading bus lane restrictions

Sean Murphy stated that this was an experimental traffic order restriction which was going to last 6 months, after which a consultation would be carried out. He stated that Wokingham could send their comments to this consultation.

Sean Murphy also stated that he had been unable to find the papers containing the decision to restrict bus lanes in Reading.

The T&F Group agreed that this restriction was discriminatory and unfair on Wokingham taxi drivers. It was agreed that the Council would write to Reading Borough Council to find out the reason for this and express the views of the T&F Group. It was suggested this should come from the Executive Member for PPP

c) New taxi ranks

Julia O'Brien stated that she had spoken to Highways and the response was in the notes of the previous meeting.

d) Part-time weekend late hour ranks at Denmark Street and Peach Street

Julia O'Brien stated that she had spoken to Highways and the response was in the notes of the previous meeting.

e) Council's ranks at rail station (Oxford Road and opposite the Station Tap lay-by

Julia O'Brien stated that the land referred to at the rail station was privately owned, therefore the Council could not intervene.

Karen Court stated that she had contacted the rail station manager and arranged for a meeting on 26 September at 11am to talk about this issue.

Karen Court invited Trade members [REDACTED] to attend the meeting and put forward their views.

f) Ranks for Henley festivals to be organised so that other boroughs are excluded, especially during the Rewind and Henley festivals

Julia O'Brien stated that this related to private land and that the Local Authority could not impose any rules. However, she was going to have a meeting with the organisers to talk about getting a lay-by.

Julia O'Brien agreed to ask the organisers to give preference in the queue to Wokingham drivers.

g) Administrative changes – confirmation of receipt of documents (the issue of the disappearance of documents from the letter box is still a big issue to drivers); transfer of ownership to be made possible after 5 years (this has been controversial in the past)

Julia O'Brien stated that she had raised this issue with officers and she was reassured that they were monitoring the box for correspondence.

[REDACTED] (Trade member) reported issues which took place last year, with papers going missing.

In response to a question Julia O'Brien stated that the reception at Wokingham Borough Council refused to deal with correspondence. A locked box was used for correspondence from drivers.

h) [REDACTED] taxi sign update

[REDACTED] (trade members) complained about the situation in relation to [REDACTED] Twyford signage and how they were unfairly approaching their customers.

Lindsay Ferris stated that this was in a conservation area and therefore required planning which they did not have. He informed that the Planning Enforcement Officers had been advised of this issue.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Wokingham would not impose a limit on the number of hackney carriage licences, but would review this decision if there was sudden rise in demand;
- 2) Wokingham Borough Council would write to Reading Borough Council to find out the rationale for the bus lane restrictions and make a representation in favour to Wokingham drivers; and
- 3) Julia O'Brien would ask the organisers of Henley Regatta and Henley Festival to give preference to Wokingham drivers in the queue.

7. Date of Next Potential Meeting

Sean Murphy stated that he would contact Audit and carry out the review on fees and hourly allocation as per discussions during the meeting. He proposed to contact the group to set up another meeting once this work was completed.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Sean Murphy would carry out the review and set up a future meeting to discuss the review; and
- 2) The notes of this meeting and the previous meeting would be presented to the next meeting of the Licencing and Appeals Committee.

8. Any Other Business

Julia O'Brien asked [REDACTED] Trade members to send her a list with the names of the members of the Wokingham Taxi Drivers Association. [REDACTED] they agreed to send her the list.

In response to a question [REDACTED] (trade member) stated that most drivers were in the association and that any future consultations could be made via the association.

[REDACTED] (trade member) submitted a business case proposing a tariff increase. This was accepted by Licensing Officers for consideration.

Julia O'Brien asked [REDACTED] (trade members) to remind their trade colleagues not to use the public parking in Denmark Street.

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