

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Licensing and Enforcement Committee held at Council Chamber, Blackdown House, Honiton on 26 October 2022

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 11.42 am

10 Public Speaking

The Chair welcomed the four members of the public present who were members of the East Devon taxi trade. Mr George Shorter, Chair of the East Devon Taxi Association, Mr Gary Marles, Manager of AJ Taxis, Exmouth and Mr Adrian Phillips and Mr Stuart Phillips, Millstream Taxis, Honiton addressed the Committee and made the following points:

- A series of events had affected taxi drivers including Brexit and Covid which had resulted in the loss of drivers, with a large number of vacancies still remaining.
- Costs had risen significantly including the average fuel cost increase of 58%.
- Recruitment was difficult in part due to low rates of pay.
- A large percentage of drivers are nearing retirement age and the industry needs new drivers, otherwise numbers would decrease even more.
- A number of drivers only undertake contract work which means that not all licensed drivers are out working on taxi ranks.
- In contrast to previous years pre-Covid, customers were waiting at taxi ranks, when previously there would have been plenty of taxis waiting for customers.
- A rise in tariffs would make it easier to recruit and future rises needed to be index linked to take account of price rises.
- A proprietor of a taxi business had not taken a full wage during recent months in order to ensure staff were paid.
- The cost per mile needed to include dead mileage.

Responses to questions from Members of the Committee included the following:

- It was noted that not all licensed drivers are out driving.
- Independent operators have to be badged but may not be driving.
- Some drivers are only doing County Council work.
- Night working, dealing with drunken customers, is not appealing to drivers.
- It was noted that drivers are competing across the whole of Devon for County Council work.
- If work on the taxi rank was more viable, drivers would be less attracted to County Council contract work.
- Taxi companies' main concern is that they are not able to serve East Devon and cannot keep up with demand.
- Customers have been asking when taxi firms would be putting prices up as the majority of the public does not understand how fare pricing works.
- Taxis can choose to charge lower than the set meter rate and drivers do charge less for those regular customers who they know are experiencing hardship.
- Index linking is needed going forward to avoid the need to ask the Committee for further increases.
- Taxi firms also need to be able to future proof their businesses, including the possible need to switch to electric cars in coming years.
- Taxi companies acknowledged the need to support their vulnerable customers who are known to them, however, their support is not subsidised in the way other support such as free bus passes are subsidised.

11 **Minutes of the previous meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 20 July 2022 were agreed and signed as a correct record.

12 **Declarations of interest**

Minute 15. Report on Hackney Carriage fares.
Councillor Paul Millar, Affects Non-registerable Interest, Councillor occasionally uses Hackney Carriages.

Minute 15. Report on Hackney Carriage fares.
Councillor Steve Gazzard, Affects Non-registerable Interest, Councillor habitually uses Hackney Carriages.

The Chair advised that he had met with two of the public speakers prior to the meeting as a means of fact finding and confirmed that he had come to the meeting with an open mind.

13 **Matters of urgency**

There were no matters of urgency.

14 **Confidential/exempt item(s)**

There were no confidential / exempt items.

15 **Report on Hackney Carriage fares**

The Licensing Manager thanked the taxi operators for attending the meeting.

Introducing his report, the Licensing Manager made the following points:

- The last time that a fare increase was discussed by the Committee, inflation had been at a very low level.
- Annual meetings with the taxi trade were being re-introduced.
- 2/3rds of East Devon's taxi drivers are at retirement age.
- Contract work for Devon County Council was very different from working on the taxi rank.
- It was noted that North Devon has provision for an extra fuel charge, so that when fuel prices reach a certain threshold, an additional charge per journey can be made.
- Feedback from the 2020 consultation indicated that some of the taxi trade did not support an increase at that time as it would affect vulnerable customers.
- Taxis play an important role in public safety in rural areas and a balance of supporting the taxi trade and the general public who used taxis was needed.

In response to questions for the Licensing Manager from members, the following points were made:

- There is an option to set different rates for different tariffs eg. for day and night time tariffs.
- The booking fee is discretionary and generally used by companies at night and to cover dead mileage, and was not included as part of the request for a tariff increase.

Discussion by members and questions to the taxi operators included the following:

- It was difficult to say whether operators would continue to be in business if the increase was not agreed, although one operator who employs their own drivers were of the view that their business would not be able to continue.
- Most of the business is day time as operators are finding it difficult to get drivers to work at night.
- In order to calculate when the fuel price surcharge should come into effect, North Devon used the monthly AA south west fuel costs. When fuel prices fall, the surcharge also falls back to previous levels. EDDC would monitor the AA south west fuel costs and would inform the drivers accordingly.

Should the tariff increase be agreed, officers would work up the rates set out in Appendix A in order to go out to consultation. It was agreed that the Licensing Committee meeting scheduled for 16th November 2022 would be postponed to enable the results of the consultation to be reported back to the Committee at a slightly later date.

RESOLVED

That tariff 1 would increase by 15% and tariffs 2 and 3 would increase by 20% and that the fuel surcharge trigger of £1.75 per litre would come into effect with an additional 10p per journey charged when the monthly south west fuel price set by the AA increased by 10p above the trigger price.

16 **Report on Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Vehicles Ages**

The Licensing Manager introduced the report on Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Vehicle ages. It was noted that, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the age of vehicles had been temporarily extended to a maximum of five years. The report recommended that the Committee consider a further request from Hackney Carriage Vehicle licence holders to temporarily extend the maximum age for newly licensed vehicles to five years from the date of manufacture.

RESOLVED

To temporarily extend the maximum age for newly licensed vehicles to five years from the date of manufacture until the Council's taxi policy is fully renewed in 2023.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

J Whibley (Chair)
K Bloxham (Vice-Chair)
M Chapman
O Davey
A Dent
S Gazzard
P Millar
B Taylor
T Wright

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

Officers in attendance:

Damian Hunter, Planning Solicitor
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer

Stephen Saunders, Licensing Manager

Councillor apologies:

- P Jarvis
- T Woodward

Chairman

Date: