



Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Subject: Hackney Carriage Licensing Scrutiny Review

Date: Monday 5 August

Author: Elections and Members' Services Team Leader

1. Purpose of the Report

To inform Scrutiny Members of the findings and recommendations of the Hackney Carriage Licensing task and finish group.

2. Background

The decision to review the policies and procedures governing taxi and hackney carriage licensing at Gedling Borough Council was taken following a request from the Environment and Licensing Committee Chair, who referred the subject to Scrutiny in the light of a current Law Commission review of Licensing conditions.

A working group comprising of the Members listed below was subsequently appointed by the Policy Review Scrutiny Committee:

Councillors: Paling (Chair), Prew – Smith, Miller, B. Andrews, Hughes, and Brooks. (Councillor Hope joined the group in the latter stages of the review.)

The review was supported by Jane Ansell, Elections and Members Services Team Leader; Andy Callingham, Service Manager, Public Protection; Licensing Officers Rachel Pentlow and Paul Gibbs and Senior Solicitor Francesca Whyley.

Councillor Michael Payne, Portfolio Holder, Communications and Public Protection also attended and gave evidence to the review.

3. Scope of the Review / Work plan

As this review was intended as a 'short sharp' task and finish process, a formal project scope was not drawn up. Instead at the first meeting a list of areas for clarification were raised and circulated to Licensing and Legal officers, in advance of their attendance alongside Portfolio Holder Councillor Payne at a follow up meeting held specifically to receive and discuss their feedback.

Members followed the work plan below:

- **Meeting 1: 7th November 2012** - Agree areas for examination

List of questions and officer responses: **Appendix 1.1**

- **Meeting 2: 5th February 2013** - Meet Portfolio Holder with Legal and Licensing officers to discuss issues and agree actions
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Discussion summary and agreed actions: **Appendix 1.2**

- **Meeting 3: 14th May 2013** - Meet again with officers to review progress and finalise recommendations

Discussion summary and agreed actions: **Appendix 1.3**

Supporting documents

Department of Transport best practice for taxis: **Appendix 1.4**

Mid Devon 'Eco Stars' criteria: **Appendix 1.5**

Analysis of applications dealt with as exceptions: **Appendix 1.6**

4. Findings and Recommendations

In summing up the review Members noted and were very pleased with the cooperation of the Portfolio Holder, Communications and Public Protection in giving evidence and also with the comprehensive research and feedback provided by officers of the Public Protection and Legal teams.

4.1 Key findings

On reviewing all evidence Members were satisfied in the main that the Gedling Borough Council Taxi Licensing Policy is robust and effective in steering both the licensing service and Environment and Licensing Committee process, reinforced by the fact that the policy is currently being standardised to align more closely with the policies of authorities across the County.

Members were also assured that the application process, whilst previously having been perceived as complex and onerous, is now kept under regular review and also subject to benchmarking with other authorities. Following the most recent review and a move to a 'passport office' type approach led by Customer Services, whereby a checklist of inclusions guides the applicant through the process, Members are anticipating better quality applications and information referred to committee from July 2013 onwards.

Notwithstanding the above, it had been clear to both Members and officers that some parameters applied by Gedling are less restrictive in comparison with other authorities. Along with possible differences in charging and the 'knock on' impact of new filtering processes coming into operation in neighbouring authorities, i.e. NVQs and topography tests, the compound effect has been an excessive demand for licences in Gedling, and a disproportionate number of drivers operating with limited

geographical knowledge of the area. This is also known to be a primary concern of local Taxi firms.

Members had expressed some concern over levels of customer care and communication skills amongst drivers, and were also keen to ensure that the Licensing Service contributes to the Environmental Sustainability agenda; a key priority for Gedling Borough Council.

4.2 Recommendations

The Hackney Carriage Licensing Scrutiny Working group makes the following recommendations to the Portfolio Holder for Communications and Public Protection:

1. That the planned benchmarking exercise and further standardisation of Gedling Borough Council's Licensing Policy against those of neighbouring authorities is progressed in consultation with the Licensing Committee as stated in the officer responses at **appendix 1.1**.
2. That subject to rigorous Equalities Impact Assessment the Council and Environment and Licensing Team progress the implementation of a topography test as part of the taxi licensing process with immediate effect.
3. That the Council and Licensing Team seek to encourage and promote amongst fleet operators the introduction of an NVQ for taxi drivers, to incorporate customer care and communication skills, health and safety and awareness when assisting people with disabilities.
4. That the Environment and Licensing Team seek to include taxi fleets in the DEFRA Transport Plan as part of the 'Eco Stars' initiative, giving consideration to the use of the 'fleet age' procedures as an opportunity to influence fleet operators to participate in the scheme.
5. That a cost comparison exercise on the licensing fees is carried out with those of other authorities, to establish whether this is a contributing factor to the increased demand experienced at Gedling Borough Council.
6. That the September 2013 Environment and Licensing Committee takes the opportunity to reflect upon and review the level of positive impact of the new application process and improved forms and guidance.
7. That all of the above measures form a 5 year improvement plan which is assessed at an appropriate point in the future and reported to the Overview Scrutiny Committee.

4.3 Acknowledgements

Members would like to thank the following for their input to the review: Councillor Michael Payne, Portfolio Holder; Communications and Public Protection; Andy Callingham, Service Manager, Public Protection; Francesca Whyley, Senior Solicitor; Paul Gibbs, Licensing Enforcement Officer; Rachel Pentlow, Licensing Officer.