



# Walsall Council

## **REPORT OF THE HEAD OF PUBLIC PROTECTION**

### **TO A MEETING OF THE LICENSING AND SAFETY COMMITTEE**

**WEDNESDAY 24<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2007**

#### **TAXI MARSHALLING**

#### **1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 To consider the introduction of the Taxi Marshalling scheme
- 1.2 This report has been produced at the request of the Taxi Liaison Group and also formed the basis for the report to the Pillar Executive Group.

#### **2.0 RECOMMENDATION**

- 2.2 Licensing and Safety Committee is recommended to consider the report, endorse the success of the scheme, and recommend that officers strive to identify future funding to maintain the scheme.

#### **3.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 3.1 Originally a pilot scheme was funded for three months starting at the end of February 2007. The funding was approved under a local area agreement.
- 3.2 On the 19<sup>th</sup> July 2007 the Safer and Stronger Communities Pillar Executive Group agreed that the remainder of funding be released due to positive evaluation feedback on the pilot scheme. This funding will support the taxi marshalling scheme until the end of March 2008.

#### **4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 Accords with Council Policy.

#### **5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 Nil.

## **6.0 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES**

6.1 None.

## **7.0 WARDS AFFECTED**

7.1 All.

## **8.0 CONSULTEES**

8.1 Taxi Liaison Group and as indicated within this report.

## **9.0 CONTACT OFFICER**

9.1 Lorraine Boothman – Senior Principal Trading Standards Officer.  
Ext. 2259.

## **10.0 BACKGROUND**

10.1 The pilot for the taxi marshalling scheme commenced operating on 28 April 2007. It operates on Friday and Saturday nights in Lichfield Street and Bradford Place. Initial indications show the drivers of black cabs are very pleased with the scheme:

- Reporting an increase in trade
- Reduction in time waiting for fares
- No longer complaining about large groups of customers jumping in cabs where only one or two had booked it
- Reduction in and displacement of illegal flag downs by private hire vehicles
- Fewer customers getting aggressive

10.2 From the customers' perspective:

- It is easier to get a cab as they no longer refuse to take short fares
- The cabs have to set the meter and so there is less overcharging
- The queue is more organised and so they get a vehicle in turn
- Because it is easier to get a cab, there is a reduction in the number of customers becoming aggressive
- There would appear to be more vehicles working then previously and so shorter periods of waiting for a cab
- There have been fewer complaints from the public about the trade on Friday and Saturday nights since the introduction of the scheme

10.3 The private hire firms benefit by a reduction in the customers who have been intercepted by rival firms and by promotional material available to all sectors of the community which lists the telephone numbers of all the private hire firms.

## **11.0 Implementation of the scheme**

- 11.1 The scheme operates on Friday and Saturday nights in two locations: Lichfield Street and Bradford Place.
- 11.2 **Lichfield Street:** it originally operated between 10.30 and 2.00 as these were the hours which early consultation indicated were the peak times for people catching cabs at this location. It very quickly became apparent that an adjustment to these timings was needed. The marshals were asked to work through to 3.30 from day one on Lichfield Street and after the first couple of weeks the start time there was delayed to 11.00 as there was virtually no demand for cabs before this time.
- 11.3 **Bradford Place:** it was originally operated between 12.00 and 04.00. These hours have been retained. Again the plan was to have 2 marshals working for the duration, supplemented by a third between the peak hours of 2.00 to 4.00.
- 11.4 **Ablewell Street:** there is a taxi rank here which is used on Friday and Saturday nights. However, there are no marshals operating here. This is in the main part due to finances.
- 11.5 When the scheme was implemented, briefings were undertaken with the police responsible for Fort Alice and the town centre and at the town centre Pubwatch. If customers leaving the late night venues in the town centre asked about where to catch cabs, Doorstaff and licensees were asked to direct customers to the marshalled ranks or refer them to the leaflet which was available to them. Venues with DJ's were asked to make announcements that the scheme was operational too. A letter was also sent to the licensed drivers to advise them of the commencement of the scheme.

## **12.0 Advertising and promotion of the scheme**

- 12.1 This was carried out by:-
- Press release through the Council's communications office. This was taken up by a number of the local newspapers and interviews were carried out with two independent local radio stations.
  - Advertising on the 2 illuminated signs operated via 24/7 near to Studio 45 and the bus station.
  - Posters distributed around public places, council offices, licensed premises.
  - Pocket cards promoting the scheme, including the details of all private hire bases and information about the contacts for the officers for people to make complaints comments or suggestions. These cards have the added benefit of being useful to any one who uses private hire vehicles and are of a size to fit into a wallet or purse so that they can be kept.

## **13.0 Results of the scheme**

13.1 When the scheme was implemented there were a number of objectives:

- Improved efficiency in loading passengers into vehicles resulting in shorter waiting times for both drivers and passengers
- Supervision of the queues to reduce queue jumping
- An official presence to provide reassurance to passengers and improved feeling of personal safety
- An official presence that may be able to identify aggressive behaviour and call for early police assistance before a situation escalates
- Fewer opportunities for large groups getting into taxis when only one or two passengers had arranged the fare
- Fewer opportunities for drivers to fail to set the meter or to overcharge
- Fewer opportunities for drivers to refuse to take short journey fares
- Increased confidence by passengers in the trade and therefore potential increase in business
- Improved efficiency in getting passengers out of town at the end of the night and thereby reducing the numbers of people loitering and reduction in potential flash points

13.2 For the first few weeks, the response from the public whilst out on the ranks was mixed. This was primarily due to them not knowing what to expect and not being used to people holding the car doors open for them etc. They were also unused to being asked to queue for cabs. However, there were a number of positive and appreciative comments made to officers during the first two weeks.

13.3 The Monday after the first weekend, an email was received which read:

“Great to see marshals on Friday night at the taxi ranks - 1st time in many months got the 1st taxi in the rank with the meter on instead of being fobbed off to 2nd taxi then 3rd then 4th because they will not do short journeys i.e to Moat Rd !! Also got home for £4.20 instead of the usual £5.00. Well done keep these marshals !! Happy customer!!”

13.4 Other than for complaints, specific data is hard to come by for this scheme. However, there are a number of successes which can be reported.

- 13.5 An informal survey of the Hackney Carriage Drivers on a Saturday night resulted in the following information:
- By far and above the majority of drivers said that the scheme was a big improvement. Only 2 drivers said that there was no difference really. None of them said that the scheme was worse or that it should not operate.
  - No drivers made a comment that large groups tried to get into cabs when there had originally only been a couple of customers negotiating.
  - At least 6 drivers commented that business was up. This is reflected in early feed back from week 2.
  - The same drivers commented that the marshals are needed later than 4.00 am at Bradford Place as the club there does not close until 5.00 am
  - One driver asked why the marshals did not work on the Ablewell St rank.
  - Private Hire vehicles taking illegal “flag downs” have mostly been displaced from Lichfield St to The Nationwide and Tesco. Those that are still on Lichfield Street are mostly confined to outside Chicago Rock and Aruba. This is a little way from the rank and the point where the marshals are stationed. The marshals have reported that if they stand there, then this does deter these private hire vehicles. However, the peak time for this activity is also the peak time for them being needed at the rank itself.
- 13.6 A survey of customers was attempted. However, this proved difficult to carry out because the customers are catching cabs at the end of a night out when they have been drinking and just wanting to get a cab home as quickly as possible. It was possible to talk to a few customers though. These generally thought the scheme was an improvement and the main benefit that they reported was that the cabs no longer refused to take fares for the short journeys.
- 13.7 By observing behaviour on the street and comparing it to the situation prior to the implementation of the scheme, it was apparent that there was a marked improvement. Previously, customers would approach a cab on the rank and be refused because the journey was too short or the customer would not take it because driver wanted to charge too much. This would be repeated as they moved from cab to cab along the rank. Initially, the customer was behaving perfectly reasonably. However, they would quickly get frustrated and tempers would rise, often resulting in them hitting the vehicles and swearing at the drivers. This behaviour has virtually stopped now. There are still one or two customers who don't want to go to the front of the rank and would rather try whichever cab they want to take. However, the drivers now just send them to the front vehicle. It was also noted that the quieter customers are now able to catch a cab in turn. Whereas previously the larger groups and more aggressive customers would have forced their way to the front making it

much harder for the former customers to find a cab. A number of people now also came straight to the officer while working on Saturday night and automatically asked where the front of the queue was. They were expecting to join a queue.

- 13.8 In order to increase the efficiency of people getting cabs home and to assist the police in clearing the town centre quickly, one of the successes would be an increase in the number of vehicles working at night. There is no data available on how many vehicles were normally working prior to the commencement of the scheme. However, again by observing the flow of customers and vehicles, it can be seen that there are fewer periods now when there are no vehicles available and the length of these is shorter. Additionally, the drivers and marshals have reported that there are more vehicles working.
- 13.9 The increase in trade reported by the drivers is indicative that there are more customers using the vehicles. This may meet several of the objectives of the scheme, namely that there is more confidence by the public in the trade; that there are fewer instances of drivers refusing short journeys; not setting their meters or over charging; increased feeling of safety and reassurance due to an official presence. However, it is not possible to identify if it is any particular one of these objectives which has caused the increase in trade or a combination of these factors.
- 13.10 If customers have increased confidence in the integrity of the taxi trade, then customers from out of the Borough are more likely to come into Walsall for a night out in the knowledge that they will be able to get a cab home without being overcharged.
- 13.11 On week two of the operation of the scheme, there was a bank holiday weekend. Walsall town centre is as busy on the Sunday night on a bank holiday as it is on a normal Friday. Because the scheme was new and we did not have enough information in sufficient time, we were not able to ask the marshals to work an extra night. Feedback from the drivers after that weekend was that it was as bad as before the scheme started. The marshals were asked to work the Sunday for the second bank holiday weekend in May and August and there was no adverse feedback reported. This would again indicate that the scheme has made an improvement to the taxi trade in the town centre.
- 13.12 Subject to intelligence from the hackney Carriage/Private Hire trade, the licensed trade and police, it is intended to operate the marshals on additional nights in the run up to Christmas and New Year.
- 13.13 Speaking to the licensees of the main licensed premises in town at pubwatch and individually, they report that there is an improvement in behaviour on the marshalled ranks.

- 13.14 A few weeks after the implementation of the scheme one of the private hire base operators has also reported that the scheme is of benefit to them. There were fewer incidents of their pre booked fares not being at the agreed pick up point. This is because previously, other private hire firms would “steal” the fare and this has reduced now.
- 13.15 The crime statistics for the town centre do not give any information which would indicate whether the scheme has had an impact or not. There are so few crimes reported for the times of operation of the scheme that no statistical significance can be given to them.

#### **14.0 Improvements to the Scheme**

- 14.1 It would be nice to be able to meet some of the suggested improvements of the scheme put forward by the drivers and marshals.
- To work after 4.00 am on Bradford Place. The reason that the marshals do not work later is to keep within the budget and also that the police are not on patrol after 4.00 am. There is a duty to protect the health and safety of the marshals. The police are currently reviewing Fort Alice with a view to extending the hours. Once this is confirmed the hours of the marshals will be reviewed accordingly.
  - To operate marshals on Ablewell Street. There is insufficient funding to do this at the moment. The size of the rank probably only warrants one marshal but for health and safety reasons, two would be required.
  - Tackling illegal flag downs. Locating marshals in the areas which are known for illegal flag downs or having them on patrol would help to deter this activity. Option 1 would be to take a marshal from Lichfield St to stand by Chicago Rock. This would help the situation in one location only and the peak time for this activity is the peak time for the main rank when all 3 marshals are needed to carry out their main task. The second option would be to employ two additional marshals. Again this is a funding issue. This can also be tackled by enforcement by the Licensing Enforcement Officers. Exercises to undertake this type of work are ongoing and are planned for the future. However, it has a short term impact as officers cannot be doing this all night every weekend.
  - There is still potential for customers going into the road to try to catch cabs, to run across to private cars or for pre booked private hire vehicles and also if there is any minor disorder. Discussions are ongoing to install pedestrian guard rail.

## **15.0 Conclusions**

- 15.1 The pilot scheme is a success and has met most, if not all, of the objectives set out at the start. It has been well received by the trade and the public and makes a contribution to the safety of the drivers and customers and to the economy of Walsall.