

TAXI/PRIVATE HIRE LIAISON GROUP

Tuesday, 22nd March, 2005 at 6.00 p.m.

In a Conference Room at the Council House, Walsall

Present

Councillor Keith Sears (Chairman)
Councillor Cath Micklewright
Councillor John Rochelle
Councillor Carol Rose

Mr. B. Corlett, Environmental Health and Consumer Services
Miss S. Allman, Environmental Health and Consumer Services
Mr. M. Yaqoob, Walsall Taxi Federation
Mr. Z. Ali, Walsall Taxi Federation
Mr. M. Khan, Walsall Taxi Federation
Mr. P. White, Private Hire Association
Mr. K. Hussain, Private Hire Association

Mr. A. Goodman (Urban Regeneration)
Mr. J. Beavon, Head of Trading Standards

Changes in Membership/Substitutions

There were no changes in membership or substitutions reported.

Apologies

An apology for non-attendance was submitted on behalf of West Midlands Police.

Minutes

Resolved

That the minutes of the last meeting held on 27th January, 2005, a copy having previously been circulated to each Member of the Group, be approved by the Group as a correct record.

Testing/Maintenance, Procedures and Identification of Hackney Carriage/ Private Hire Vehicles

The report of the Head of Public Protection and a copy letter of Walsall Private Hire Association dated 25th February, 2005 were circulated at the meeting:-

(see annexed)

Mr. Corlett explained that the report was in three parts. The first part of the report was to consider a request by the trade to reduce the number of vehicle tests. He said that it had been hoped to include a report to the meeting in respect of garage test failures but it had not been possible to do this. A new General Manager had been appointed at the garage who was in the process of implementing changes and, for this reason, a report on this matter was not available at the present time.

It was, therefore, **agreed** that further consideration of this matter be deferred to the next meeting.

Mr. Corlett said that the second part of the report was for the Group to consider the adoption of a single colour scheme for all private hire vehicles. The third part of the report was an update on the situation with regards to licence plates and side stickers.

Mr. Corlett said the adoption of a single colour scheme had been put forward for consideration at the last meeting and the report highlighted how other Local Authorities were tackling this problem and what difficulties there could be for the adoption of a single colour scheme.

Mr. Corlett said that the prevalent colour of many cars was various shades of silver and this was the colour which Sandwell had adopted for all its private hire vehicles. The other suggested colour had been yellow but Mr. Corlett said that it was difficult to buy cars in yellow that were suitable for the private hire trade. Further, the cost could be prohibitive if the trade were required to use this colour. Another possible colour choice was white but Mr. Corlett said that many manufacturers had moved away from producing white cars.

Mr. Corlett said that the report stated that if the Group and the Licensing and Safety Committee were so minded, alternative means of identifying private hire vehicles to make them more highly visible and recognisable to both the general public and the Enforcement Team could be explored. One possibility was the use of roof signs on private hire vehicles and Mr. Corlett had brought a mock-up of how this would look, which he showed to Members of the Group. He said that it would also be indicated on the back and sides of the vehicle that it was licensed by Walsall MBC. There were different shapes of roof signs that could be used; the majority of these were rectangular but there were some that were crescent shaped. The cost of the roof signs would be approximately £55 each, which meant that it would cost approximately £30,000 to purchase the plates but this purchase would, obviously, be a matter that would be subject to tender.

The Chairman queried whether it was proposed to use black and yellow chequered stickers in addition to the roof signs.

Mr. Corlett said that he had met with a company which supplied these and they had offered to create a mock-up of side plates of a high visibility reflective orange colour. He went on to say, however, that they were limited by law with regard to what reflective signs could be placed on the front and sides of vehicles. He said that the orange and black number signs stood out well on driver's doors and the back doors of vehicles.

Mr. White queried where, if these ideas were adopted, the various taxi companies would be allowed to advertise themselves on the vehicles. He said that many taxi companies had their name on the roof of the taxis at the present time. Previously, the names of the companies had appeared on windscreens.

Mr. Corlett said that taxi firms were still allowed to put their names on top of the windscreen by the rear view mirror.

Councillor Rose was concerned that this matter was again under discussion. She referred to the minutes of the last meeting and said that the Group had agreed that a uniform colour for private hire vehicles in Walsall be adopted and that this be phased in over a five year period. She said that easily recognisable private hire vehicles was what the general public wanted and this was the view across the whole country. She said that part of the Council's Vision was to make Walsall a safer Borough by 2008 and this was why a decision had been made on this issue at the last meeting.

Mr. Hussain said that at the last meeting, it had been agreed that Mr. Corlett discuss this matter with representatives of the Private Hire Association and that their views be brought back to this meeting. He queried why it was assumed there was more safety in having all private hire vehicles of one colour. There were already stickers on private hire vehicle doors to make them recognisable. The taxi companies had customers who used private hire vehicles to go to places like night clubs and they liked to go out in style. At present, the companies were able to offer them a choice of colour of vehicle.

Councillor Rochelle said that it had been agreed at the last meeting that a uniform colour for private hire vehicles be adopted. He believed, however, that there were still areas for discussion as this matter had not yet been discussed by Licensing and Safety Committee for recommendations to be made to Cabinet. His own view was that a crescent shaped roof sign on private hire vehicles would be very recognisable and would stand out more.

Mr. Corlett said that as requested at the last meeting, he had discussed this matter with representatives of the Private Hire Association. As well as the adoption of a single colour, the report set out various alternative methods of marking vehicles. This could be tried for an agreed period of time to see whether it improved the general public's perception of what were licensed private hire vehicles. If this did not improve matters, then he could see no reason why the trade would have any objections to the adoption of a uniform colour for private hire vehicles in Walsall.

Mr. Corlett referred to hackney carriages and said that the Licensing and Safety Committee had previously agreed that all new licensed vehicles must be black to make them stand out. The regulations in respect of private hire vehicles were at the present time very loose; they could be any colour and could be licensed to carry any number of people from one to eight. What the Taxi Licensing Office wished to create was consistency for private hire vehicles. He believed that before the Council resorted to stipulating that all private hire vehicles must be a uniform colour, it would be necessary to undertake a full survey of the views of the general public, similar to those carried out in Dudley and Sandwell, and this could cost up to £20,000.

Mr. Hussain said that in many towns, ordinary cars could be used as either taxis or private hire vehicles which was why these towns were looking to adopt a uniform colour. The situation in Walsall was different. The general public could not mix up taxis and private hire vehicles as all hackney carriages had to be black. Mr. Hussain said that when customers rang for a private hire vehicle, they were able to tell them what colour the car would be that would pick them up. If all private hire vehicles were the same colour, this could create problems. Customers were also given a telephone number of the taxi company to make sure that they were getting into the right vehicle.

Mr. Ali referred to the restrictions which applied to hackney carriages but not to private hire vehicles.

Mr. Corlett said that a report relating to proposed new conditions for both hackney carriages and private hire vehicles was currently being prepared and would be submitted to a future meeting of the Licensing and Safety Committee. The proposals would include restrictions on the age limit of both hackney carriages and private hire vehicles.

The Chairman said that the Group was agreed that safety of the general public was paramount. He said that his own view was that he favoured a uniform colour plus the type of signs that Mr. Corlett had shown to the meeting. He noted that it might be necessary to carry out a survey of the general public to decide this issue. Following discussion, it was **agreed** that further consideration of the report be deferred to the next meeting.

Issues raised by Walsall Taxi Federation

With the agreement of the Group, this item was brought forward on the agenda for consideration.

(a) Ranks (query about the feeder rank)

A briefing note in respect of temporary relocation of Leicester Street taxi rank was circulated at the meeting:-

(see annexed)

Mr. Alan Goodman, or Urban Regeneration, was in attendance for this item.

Mr. Goodman said that Environmental Regeneration had been made aware on 1st February, 2005 that extensive refurbishment of flats above the shops in Lower Bridge Street would be beginning in mid-February, 2005 and that these works were programmed to last up to twelve months. The works would involve extensive scaffolding, hoists and provision for skips. This meant that it would not now be possible to relocate the taxi rank to Lower Bridge Street before March, 2006. It was, therefore, necessary to consider alternative possible options for the temporary relocation of the Leicester Street taxi rank and various options were set out in the briefing note for the Group's consideration.

Councillor Rose referred to the Group's recommendation to Licensing and Safety Committee relating to a feeder taxi rank being located in Upper Bridge Street. The recommendation had been approved by Committee and was now due to be considered by Cabinet on 23rd March, 2005. She said that in the circumstances, she believed that the Chairman should request Cabinet to defer consideration of this matter. There was general agreement to this proposal.

Following discussion, it was **agreed**:-

- (1) That location 2 - Upper Bridge Street (inbound, facing towards the Old Court House), be recommended to Licensing and Safety Committee as the temporary location of the Leicester Street taxi rank until the completion of the refurbishment work in Lower Bridge Street;
- (2) That in view of these circumstances, the Chairman be requested to ask Cabinet to defer consideration of the recommendation of Licensing and Safety Committee in respect of proposals for a feeder taxi rank in Upper Bridge Street.

(b) Fares (timescale)

The report of the Head of Public Protection was circulated at the meeting:-

(see annexed)

It was **agreed** unanimously:-

That option 1 (as detailed in Paragraph 1.3 of the report) be recommended to Licensing and Safety Committee in respect of the request by the Walsall Taxi Federation for an increase in fares and charges for the hire of hackney carriage vehicles within Walsall Metropolitan Borough.

(c) Private Hire Touting

Mr. Ali said that his members wished things to be done properly and wanted to know what the Council intended to do about private hire vehicle drivers touting for business.

Mr. Corlett said that there were 21 prosecutions of drivers pending for illegal toutting in Walsall. Officers had conducted an exercise and had been out on Friday and Saturday evenings and caught drivers. Unfortunately, there were a number of private hire cars that came into Walsall from neighbouring Authorities such as Sandwell and Cannock who were also toutting for business. They were not licensed in Walsall and were not insured. An exercise was planned to deter these drivers from coming into Walsall and thinking that it was an easy place for them to operate. These drivers would be reported to their Licensing Authorities for them to take action.

Councillor Rochelle said that this was why it was important to have clear indication on private hire vehicles to show that they were licensed by Walsall.

Mr. Corlett referred to his talks with companies about purchasing clearer signs for private hire vehicles operating in Walsall. He said that signs fitted to car roofs were magnetic so that they could be removed if the driver committed an offence and a licence was suspended. Further, if private hire vehicles were found not to be displaying the signs then they would be committing an offence.

Mr. White said that at the last meeting of the base operators, it had been agreed that any driver caught toutting would be sacked. Members of his Association refused to take on any driver who had been convicted of toutting.

Mr. Ali said that he believed that base operators should be more responsible as drivers sacked by one company were often taken on by another. He believed that Walsall MBC should take steps to ensure that bases operated responsibly. If a base were found to be allowing this to happen, then the Council should take action against them. The responsibilities of base operators should be clearly set out in their operating conditions and if drivers were caught and suspended, there should be some form of action that could be taken against their bases as well.

Mr. Corlett said that the Taxi Licensing Office was in the process of amending its conditions to make base operators more responsible. He stressed that a number of prosecutions were pending against them. There had been cases of base operators appearing before Committee and having their licences revoked. He said that base operators had huge responsibilities as they gave work to drivers and it was important that they ensured that drivers acted responsibly, for example, in wearing their badges. He said that the base operators should be checking on drivers and their vehicles before they went out. Part of the conditions of base operators were to keep details of insurance for each vehicle and badge. Every base operator was given a copy of these conditions when their licences were renewed which they were obliged to keep at the base. The Taxi Licensing Office sent out a number of information letters to base operators which they were asked to display and he agreed the importance of base operators taking their responsibilities seriously.

The Chairman asked whether a report could be submitted to a future meeting of Licensing and Safety Committee on the responsibilities of base operators.

Mr. Corlett repeated that conditions in respect of hackney carriages and private hire vehicles were in the process of being totally overhauled. Conditions relating to other Authorities had been examined as part of this process and the proposed amendments would be brought to the Group for discussion and then to Licensing and Safety Committee for approval.

Taxi Fare Proposals

The Chairman said that this matter had already been covered earlier in the meeting when the Group had considered the report relating to the request by the Walsall Taxi Federation for an increase of fares and charges.

MOT Pass Rate Performance

Consideration of this item was deferred to the next meeting.

Spot Checks

The report of the Head of Public Protection was circulated at the meeting :-

(see annexed)

Mr. Corlett said that a joint exercise involving West Midlands Police and the Taxi/Private Hire Licensing Enforcement Team had been carried out on three nights in March, 2005 in the Willenhall area. The report set out the results of the exercise.

Councillor Rose queried why the majority of vehicles stopped were private hire vehicles.

Mr. Corlett said that hackney carriages operated very rarely in Willenhall. Willenhall had been targeted because an exercise had been funded for the Willenhall area. The Team had driven in a police vehicle around Willenhall and any private hire vehicle or hackney carriage spotted had been pulled over for checking.

In answer to points raised by Mr. Ali in respect of setting meters in hackney carriages, Mr. Corlett said that hackney carriages were not private hire vehicles and that if a meter were fitted, then it must be used and the meter must be set for every journey. Even in cases where hackney carriages were used for pre-paid contract journeys, the meter must always be set.

It was **agreed** that the contents of the report be noted.

Date of Next Meeting

It was **agreed** that the date of the next meeting be arranged following consultation with the Chairman and that Members of the Group be notified accordingly.

Termination of Meeting

The meeting terminated at 7.30 p.m.

Chairman

Date