

TAXI/PRIVATE HIRE LIAISON GROUP

Monday, 25th September, 2006 at 6.00 p.m.

In a Conference Room at the Council House, Walsall

Present

Councillor Keith Sears (Chairman)
Councillor Anthony Harris
Councillor Cath Micklewright

Mr. B. Corlett, Public Protection
Ms. S. Allman, Public Protection
Mr. J. Beavon, Public Protection

Mr. K. Hussain, Walsall Private Hire Association
Mr. P. White, Walsall Private Hire Association

Mr. Z. Ali, Walsall Taxi Federation

Mr. R. Pickersgill, Crime Reduction Officer

Apology

An apology for non-attendance was submitted on behalf of Councillor Rochelle.

Minutes

It was **AGREED** that the minutes of the last meeting held on 15th August, 2006, a copy having previously been circulated to each Member of the Group, be approved by the Group as a correct record.

Taxi licence service relocation to Challenge Buildings

The report of the Head of Public Protection was submitted:-

(see annexed)

Mr. Beavon briefly outlined the proposals, the advantages and disadvantages, and indicated that any reservations from the trade to the proposal would be taken back to the Head of Public Protection.

From the Taxi Federation point of view, Mr. Ali commented that it appeared that the Council had already made its mind up regarding the transfer. He found it difficult to see only three disadvantages and made the point that three parking spaces would be insufficient compared to the parking that was available at the current location in Proffitt Street. He didn't think there was any need to change a facility that was operating perfectly well at the present time and expressed the view that the trade would not have the same facilities at Challenge Buildings that they currently have at Proffitt Street. Because of this, his organisation was opposed to the move of the Taxi Licensing Office to Challenge Buildings. He went on to say that the fees had been increased when the Taxi Licensing Office had been moved to Proffitt Street but there was no mention in the current report of reducing fees if the office was moved to Challenge Buildings. He made the point that the trade was happy with the existing facilities at Proffitt Street. He made reference to the fact that facilities would be made available at Challenge Buildings to pay by means of credit or debit card or cheque but asked whether cash would be possible. In reply, Mr. Beavon indicated that there would be no change to the facility currently provided at Proffitt Street.

From the point of view of the Private Hire Association, Mr. Hussain referred to the fact that the Taxi Licensing Office had moved from the Walsall Depot in 1999 to the Civic Centre and there were problems at that particular time, particularly in relation to parking. Things were now better with the current location at Proffitt Street, however, from a personal point of view, he felt everything should come under one roof, possibly at the North Walsall Depot.

The Chairman indicated that the current location at Proffitt Street was only temporary in that the premises, a former Neighbourhood Office, was only designed to last ten years or so. He pointed out that the proposed new location would bring all licensing under one roof.

Mr. Beavon indicated that the philosophy of the move was to provide a better service for the trade. He indicated that the possibility of moving the service to North Walsall Depot had been looked at but there was nowhere suitable.

Mr. Ali asked Mr. Beavon whether the office would be relocated and expressed his concern that if this was the case, there was no point in bringing the issue to the Liaison Group for discussion when a decision had already been taken. Councillor Harris expressed the view that it was logical to move to new premises but indicated that he had sympathy with the trade about the way this had been done. The trade needed an opportunity to either agree or disagree with the proposal and not to be presented with a "fait accompli". In reply, Mr. Beavon indicated that the rationalisation of Council buildings was a management decision. He added that this move needed to be done and the officers wanted to tell the trade openly. At present, the service is fragmented and, bringing the service together, would give a better use of resources. Mr. Ali made the point that the move of the Taxi Licensing Office to Challenge Buildings would be of no advantage to members of the general public. Councillor Harris made the point that it would be more financially viable for the Council to have the move but the Group needed to see what the merits of the move were.

Mr. Hussain asked whether there were problems when the Taxi Licensing Office was located at the Civic Centre. Mr. Corlett confirmed that there were problems and pointed out that the Licensing Office was intended to move to Challenge Buildings initially but, at that time, the accommodation was not available. Proffitt Street became available and the Taxi Licensing Office was moved to that location. It was only intended as a temporary move. The move to Challenge Buildings was what was originally intended.

In answer to a question from Councillor Harris, Mr. Beavon indicated that there was no formal timescale for the move to Challenge Buildings.

The point was re-iterated that the move would be of no benefit to the public. The report did not contain details of the financial implications and whether there would be any cost implications or savings for the trade. Mr. Beavon indicated that any savings would be ploughed back into the trade.

Councillor Harris made the point that there was a need to see figures to show what advantages there would be to the trade in terms of a possible reduction in fees or savings and suggested that now was not the time for the Liaison Group to discuss the issue.

It was **AGREED** that consideration of this issue be deferred and that officers be requested to produce a report at the earliest opportunity, the report to include the financial aspects of the proposed move, the possibility of moving the Taxi Licensing Office to the North Walsall Depot and details of income received from the fees.

Outstanding issues

(a) Private hire touting (employment of marshals)

Mr. Corlett indicated that he had spoken to Birmingham City Council who had indicated that they had only run a marshalling scheme for a festive season (for a fortnight over the Christmas period). He added that it was not funded by the Council and was very expensive. He also indicated that there was nowhere in Walsall where marshalling points could be set up and it would, therefore, not be very cost effective.

Mr. Ali (Walsall Taxi Federation) indicated that Birmingham was still operating a scheme. Mr. Corlett indicated that it was not an official Council-run scheme but it may be that door supervisors were acting as marshals on behalf of the local clubs. Mr. Corlett indicated that officers could look at alternative options but pointed out that the service had only got two dedicated Enforcement Officers.

The main problems with touting occurred between Thursdays and Sundays but there was also a need for the police to clear the Town Centre. There were some prosecutions for illegal touting. Mr. Corlett indicated that mystery customers were being used, a project was undertaken a few weeks ago and the taxi service had a 100% pass rate.

Mr. Rob Pickersgill, Crime Reduction Officer, indicated that from the police point of view, they were in favour of marshalling. He indicated that Walsall was a smaller town than Birmingham and although it might be difficult to introduce a marshalling scheme, it was feasible. He added that funding could be available through the Safer Walsall Borough Partnership or its partners. He advised Members that the night time economy had grown and that because of this, marshalling would be beneficial. Mr. White, Walsall Private Hire Association, made the point that the police did design a pick up site in Sutton Coldfield.

It was **AGREED** that officers from the police and the Taxi Licensing Service arrange a meeting to discuss this matter further with the intention of producing a report for submission to a future meeting of the Group.

(b) Fixed penalty fines

It was noted that the legality of this issue was being explored with the intention of a report being submitted to a future meeting of the Group.

(c) Town Centre taxi ranks

It was noted that there was no representation from the Highways Section at the meeting.

It was **AGREED** that this item be deferred to the next meeting of the Group and that an officer from the Highway Section be requested to attend that meeting.

(d) Reduction in fees paid to the Council

(e) MOT pass rate performance

It was **AGREED** that these items be deferred to the next meeting of the Group.

(f) Income received from fees

It was noted that this item would be incorporated into the report on the relocation of the taxi service to Challenge Buildings, which will be submitted to the next meeting of the Group.

Termination of Meeting

The meeting terminated at 7.20 p.m.

Chairman

Date