

Taxi Consultation with SCC Licensing

10am Thursday 18th February
Conference held via Microsoft Teams

Attendees: Cllr Catherine McEwing (Chair) [CM]; Cllr Graham Galton [GG]; Cllr Matthew Renyard [MR]; Cllr Beryl Harris [BH]; Cllr Dave Shields [DS]; Cllr Toqueer Kataria [TK]; Cllr John Noon [JN]; Cllr Matt Bunday [MB]; Cllr Valerie Laurent [VL]; Les Slater (HC Rep) [LS]; Simon May (PH rep) [SM]; Joseph Jones (Door 2 Door Cars) [JJ]; Jamilur Rahman (PH rep) [JR]; Sam Shahid (Southampton Hackney Organisation) [SS]; Ali Haydor (PH rep) [AH]; Mohammed Sumra (HC rep, SHO) [MS]; Aleksandra Sondej (HC Driver) [AS]; Matthew Hill, SCC Economic Development [MH]; Rosie Zambra (SCC Consumer Protection and Environmental Services) [RZ]; Russell Hawkins (SCC Licensing) [RH]; Kate Aspinall (SCC Licensing, note taker) [KA].

Apologies: None

1. Grant Scheme for Taxi Drivers – Matt Hill, SCC Economic Development

MH summarised the work being carried out to devise a grant scheme for taxi drivers based on the Additional Restrictions Grant; this is set up by central government to cover fixed business costs only, and cannot support earnings. There are other schemes that can support loss of earnings e.g. HMRC self-employment income support scheme (SEISS). Schemes set up elsewhere have made it clear that only unavoidable fixed costs are covered, e.g in New Forest and Portsmouth; NFDC have gone further by restricting grant to fixed property costs for businesses with premises in the NFDC area.

SCC cannot access HMRC data so cannot identify those who have applied for the HMRC support grant.

The team is small and the legal framework very complicated; MH would welcome suggestions from the trade to help identify unavoidable fixed costs. Every assessment will be audited so SCC must require evidence in support of every single application.

SM: suggested a number of fixed costs that might be easily identified/evidenced by those who own their own vehicle, including insurance, vehicle finance, MOTs, licence fees and so on.

LS: his businesses operated from home haven't qualified for support because they don't have business rated premises, although he did qualify for SEISS; would multiple businesses be taken into account for this grant, given that many businesses have had a 75% drop in income.

MH: SCC is trying to design a scheme to support businesses' fixed costs that have fallen through the gaps between previous schemes, many of which have focussed on property by way of a link to business rates. Main difficulty is the administration workload, so licence holders will need to provide evidence for their costs so as to reduce the admin workload as far as possible and make processing efficient and fast.

The current ARG scheme covers Limited Companies only because the local authority cannot access HMRC records, but it can access Companies House.

AH: Can Licensing help by identifying who has the plates? Licensing will have seen insurance details, proof of ownership, etc in the course of issuing the plate. Feels assessment of individual applications will be very time consuming, better to set a fixed amount. Those who rent vehicles from proprietors will take longer.

SS: Hopes for a solution that will help everyone. Should be simple to aid assessment.

LS: difficult for driver of rented vehicle to prove costs.

MH: agrees that we need a simple efficient scheme and acknowledges the impact any delay has on those affected. Thanked everyone for the information, will continue to discuss with Licensing officers and may be able to share proposals with the trade before it goes live.

At the end of the meeting, RH clarified that Councillors would be updated on developments with the support grant.

2. Notes from previous meeting: no matters arising

3. Covid vaccines for drivers – MS

MS raised concerns of drivers generally about where they stand in the priorities for vaccination. Feels their status as key transport workers needs to be taken into account, especially as the year progresses, students return and lockdown eases, and wants to know when they are likely to be vaccinated.

CM: priority groups are set by central government so local authorities have little information.

RH: Government has recognised taxi drivers position and risk group and considered priorities; latest estimate was to vaccinate *everyone* by the end of August. To prioritise taxi drivers they would need to collect data from every local authority and integrate that with NHS databases in order to identify drivers as a separate priority group; RH sceptical that they would decide to do this. RH concerned that there may be a high number of drivers especially from BAME communities that may not get vaccinated. Licensing would be unlikely to make this a licensing requirement but asks reps to go back to drivers and encourage take-up of the vaccine if at all possible to protect themselves and their passengers.

CM: might be worth drivers advising their GPs of their status and vulnerability and asking to be considered for vaccine through their GP.

RH: understands that vaccination hubs have an “extras” list of people who can be called in to use up surplus vaccine at the end of the day, so worth drivers checking with GPs.

ALL were agreed on:

- the high risk to all members of the BAME community and the vulnerability of drivers;
- the need to promote vaccination with drivers, who need to protect not just themselves but their passengers and their families.
- the essential role of drivers as key workers providing a service to key workers, children, those attending medical appointments, getting tested and so on.
- The need for drivers to approach their GPs to explain their status and get onto an “extras” list for vaccination

AH: Within the BAME community there is a degree of caution about the vaccine. Reps, company owners and Licensing have a duty to counteract the negativity and encourage take-up of the vaccine.

TK: pointed out drivers’ role on taking key workers’ children to school and carrying those with disabilities. Many drivers live in the areas of the city with the highest rates of Covid.

SM: reported the death last of a Radio Taxis driver from Covid. RTs have put themselves forward as a workplace testing site so that their drivers can get tested weekly to help limit the spread.

CM: Recognised that Radio Taxis is involved in Cabs for Jobs, taking people to get their vaccination at no charge.

JJ: has been providing PPE for drivers and passengers, but this is becoming unaffordable.

CM: this could be another cost to mention in respect of a grant application

4. DBS Checks – RH

Briefing on latest position as this will affect every driver. The new statutory taxi and private hire minimum standards that came out last summer require 6 monthly DBS checks. This is a big burden for both drivers and for Licensing. SCC felt that a private sector provider would be the best way to manage this in order to:

- minimise driver down time
- manage the system in order to get drivers onto the DBS update service
- minimise costs

DBS checks would no longer be linked to the driver renewal process which would speed up renewals for drivers.

The procurement process started in January, with bidders able to put forward what they saw as the best way to manage the process.

The winning bidder is not yet confirmed, but the aim is for a streamlined process with no reason for a driver to be off the road because of DBS delays. One main target would be to keep bank cards up to date to avoid delays in updating. There would be no charge for updating card details.

LS: Proprietors cannot get onto the DBS update service, because only a basic check is required. Everyone who is on the licence will be required to have a DBS check and licence will not be renewed if they haven't, which would delay the driver's renewal.

AH: Supports use of the update service and asked about timeline for new process. Noted that DBS send a reminder a month before a payment card expires and drivers can update the card before it expires.

RH: Comments about proprietors need to be made via the consultation process.

5. Licensing Fees surplus – SM

SM acknowledges the work of the licensing team in helping the trade to get back to work, but notes the surplus of £500,000 in the licensing fees budget; although fees are budgeted to be reduced over the next three years, SM feels that drivers need help *now*, and wonders if more could be done to reduce fees further.

RH: this was considered, but the gradual reduction was felt to be fairer and avoid big fluctuations in fees. Also there are some large fixed costs not accounted for in the current balance, for example for the safeguarding courses (on hold since last year), DBS licensing fees, the costs of introducing English testing, IT charges and the like.

Contributing factors to the surplus are the rapid increase in the number of drivers and the time lag in recruiting staff to administer that; SCC are committed to keeping fees as low as possible and have reduced them at the last three reviews; the money is not used for anything else.

There is also a review of fixed costs across the council later this year for the base costs such as heating and lighting.

6. Adams Morey update – MS

Is there any update on the situation to feed back to the trade re. the single supplier status and retendering of the contract?

RH: Single supplier – Phil Bates sent an email on 28th January explaining that there is no intention to change the single supplier system. This will be looked at again when the contract comes up for renewal, which will happen once the DBS contract is finalised. The single supplier arrangement was reviewed in some depth, as advised in Phil's email.

SS: a majority of drivers say they want more choice. Adams Morey are moving to smaller premises in the near future and there is concern that this may create delays in getting cars back on the road.

RH: referred back to Phil's email. If the relocation causes issues, they would be in breach of their contract. Doesn't see value in exploring what they are doing when tendering is due soon.

CM: some concerns locally about Adams Morey's intentions for the new site.

LS: Delays at Adams Morey are sometimes caused by drivers not turning up for tests or not letting them know they can't get there.

AH: Would like to see figures for no-shows at Adams Morey. Recognises the priority to be given to passenger safety but feels drivers are entitled to have more choice about where to go.

RH: This is the Council's test and AM is an agent of the Council, so it is not down to driver's choice. The council understands the drivers' point but feel that one garage/one standard is a lot clearer for everyone, as detailed in the email of 28th January.

7. Peugeot Partner disabled vehicles - SS

Arose from the experience of a family from IoW who had to visit Southampton every week to attend hospital. About 70% of the 68 disabled adapted cars are Peugeot Partners, which can only carry a wheelchair plus one passenger in the front. This meant that the family had to use one of the specialist companies who charge £20 instead of about £9-£10. SS feels that Licensing should provide some incentive to encourage multi-person vehicles otherwise before long there will be no multi-person vehicles licensed. Owners are buying the Partner because it is much cheaper than the larger vehicles.

LS: Some time ago a driver took court action against the Council to allow these vehicles, supported by other drivers. There is very low demand at ranks from wheelchair users. Although the Council is required to get more wheelchair accessible cars, it is unlikely to be in drivers' interests to increase the requirements.

RH: In an ideal world every car would have state of the art accessibility, but the agreed standards are what apply. These are currently out to consultation, and the appropriate way to raise this would be by requesting higher standards via the consultation. The family mentioned by Sam has never made any complaint, which would have helped support any move to improve standards. The Equalities Act requires 50% of the Hackney Fleet to be disabled adapted, but the relevant section is yet to be enacted. If this were to happen it would have implications for the Hackney trade as a whole.

CM: The family could book a taxi of the right size to meet them at the ferry terminal, thus getting to know the companies that provide appropriate vehicles.

SS: Concern that there is no incentive for drivers to buy the larger vehicles when they get the same fare whatever the size of vehicle, whereas private firms can charge a higher rate; in a year or so there may be none of the larger vehicles left.

CM: Advised SS to voice his concerns via the consultation, which will help to formulate what people need and how that can be met.

RH: Thinks Sam means that disabled people should be able to expect to attend a rank and find a suitably adapted vehicle there to carry them; encouraged comments about this via the consultation.

JJ: Stressed that the costs involved in getting a larger vehicle adapted can be double that of a smaller vehicle like the Partner, and the returns are limited by the fare structure. Understandable that private companies charge so much.

SS: Feels wheelchair users are not using Hackneys any more, not fair that they should have to take two cars for a family of five.

8. Low Emissions Taxi Incentive Scheme - grant expiry date - SS

Was surprised to find out that the grant expires in May, and Hackney drivers will therefore lose out because their renewals are in August. Last year the scheme was extended, can this be considered again for this year? Doesn't feel renewing in advance is reasonable in order to get £750 incentive payment.

RH: The grant scheme was originally supposed to finish at the end of 2019, but the Clean Air team managed to get an extension to May 2020 and then it was extended twice in 2020 due to the pandemic. It expires for the full cost in May, then goes to half cost, ending at the end of 2021. Stressed that it is administered by the Clean Air team, not Licensing and there are DEFRA conditions attached, included the dates for granting of payments which are already being stretched. Vehicles cannot *renew* early, but drivers can change vehicles whenever they wish, which may enable them to claim. Will raise with the Clean Air Team to see if it can be further extended.

SS: Feels that the scheme is designed for private hire because of their renewal dates; Hackney drivers don't want to be left out but they won't want to change vehicles six months early.

RH: Hackneys are not left out, it's down to them when to change their vehicles. Extending the dates disadvantages those who may have changed vehicle early thinking it was about to end, so there is a risk of giving people false impressions of how long they have to claim.

LS: Grant is available until the budget runs out, so better to claim sooner rather than later!

9. Town Quay Taxi Rank

MS: Drivers on the rank are being issued with Fixed Penalty Notices; this has been happening for some time - CCTV cameras monitor and FPN is issued by post. In the past drivers could get the ticket waived by staff in the Red Jet offices, but the system has changed recently. Now drivers have to appeal directly to the Town Quay parking enforcement company, who have in some cases ignored appeals and issued summons and increased fines. This brings the potential of CCJs being issued, affecting drivers' credit rating.

CM: clarified that this is a private parking arrangement and cannot be influenced by the City Council.

SS: Arrangement has worked for the last few years, but offices have closed because of lockdown. Can Licensing help?

CM: Not a Licensing matter, but could be something Trading Standards could look at.

RZ: Invited SS /MS to forward the information to her so that Trading Standards can start an investigation, including details of any signage or other communications about the change in regime.

MS will liaise with SS to collate information.

RH: Has been in contact in the past with the parking company Parking Eye and offered to provide list of all licensed cars; this was refused, and they won't discuss individual vehicles either – will only talk to owner/driver. The reason for the tickets is that Town Quay is included in the area covered by the Docks

Permit rules, so technically any vehicle using the rank should have a permit. There is no marshal at Town Quay, so by custom this has not been enforced. RH has offered them the full list of vehicles but they can't deal with that list as well as the list of those with permits. RH has provided an email contact for the company.

SS: Even those with permits have been issued with tickets; the requirement for a permit was abolished six years ago. He has had very little response from the email contact provided.

CM: Trading Standards will investigate, please let Rosie Zambra have as much supporting information as possible.