

LICENSING APPLICATIONS COMMITTEE MINUTES - 17 SEPTEMBER 2008

Present: Councillor Skeats (Chair);
Councillors Chowdhary, Edwards, Hanley, T Harris and P Jones.

Apologies: Councillors Beard, Byrne, Duveen, Ennis, Stainthorp, Stevens, Tickner and Willis.

RESOLVED ITEMS

2. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meetings held on 19 September 2007 and 20 May 2008 were confirmed as correct records and signed by the Chair.

3. ENFORCEMENT ACTIVITIES - UPDATE

The Head of Environment and Consumer Services submitted a report informing the Committee of increased enforcement activities by the Taxi and Private Hire Licensing Enforcement Team.

The report stated that historically there had been a number of significant problems, that had created major public safety risks, with the way in which taxis and private hire vehicles had operated in. A significant proportion of the private hire drivers and vehicles that had been licensed by the Council regularly illegally plied for hire in Reading and a number of licensed South Oxfordshire hackney carriage drivers and vehicles and Wokingham District Council private hire drivers and vehicles also regularly illegally plied for hire in Reading.

In April 2008, as a result of public safety concerns, arising from the activity of private hire and hackney carriage vehicles in Reading, staff numbers in the Taxi and Private Hire Enforcement Team had been increased from three to seven with the intention of increasing enforcement. These additional staff had initially been employed on 12 month fixed term contracts.

The report stated that in August 2008 two of the proposed four additional taxi ranks had been introduced in the town centre, in Gun Street and Friar Street, and, in order to further strengthen enforcement and to improve public safety and the perception of public safety, two part-time taxi marshals had been employed via a contract with a security company. These staff worked on a Friday and Saturday night between 2200 hours and 0330 hours and had alternated between marshalling in the main Station Road and Station Hill ranks and the new ranks in Gun Street and Friar Street.

The reported explained that a penalty point system of enforcement for private hire vehicle drivers, that was used when drivers had breached the conditions of their licence, was currently in use. The penalty points system of enforcement had been approved at the meeting of Licensing Applications Sub-Committee 3 at the 1 November 2006 meeting (Minute 27 refers) and as a result the following penalty points and warning letters had been issued to drivers:

LICENSING APPLICATIONS COMMITTEE MINUTES - 17 SEPTEMBER 2008

2 November 2006 to 31 March 2007	54 (10.8 per month)
1 April 2007 to 31 March 2008	794 (66.2 per month)
1 April 2008 to 31 August 2008	423 (84.6 per month)

The following numbers of private hire vehicle drivers licences had also been suspended as a result of drivers accumulating 12 penalty points:

1 April 2007 to 31 March 2008	41
1 April 2008 to 31 August 2008	26

Ten private hire vehicle drivers had had their licences revoked under the penalty points system of enforcement.

The report stated that since April 2008 regular covert operations to detect illegal plying for hire by both Reading licensed vehicles and drivers and vehicles and drivers that had been licensed by other Local Authorities had been regularly carried out. Any Reading licensed drivers that had been caught had been dealt with through the penalty points system of enforcement, all other drivers had been dealt with by way of prosecution. As a result of these operations and general enforcement work 39 prosecutions for plying for hire and similar offences were being pursued. The drivers that were being prosecuted had been licensed with the following authorities:

South Oxfordshire	22
Wokingham	7
West Berkshire	3
Vale of White Horse	1
Unlicensed	6

The report explained that on 24 April 2008 the Licensing section had carried out a number of roadside driver and vehicle safety checks as part of a joint exercise with Thames Valley Police (TVP) in the town centre, predominantly in St Mary's Butts and Friar Street. TVP had provided four Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) and a town centre police officer. Police officers had directed drivers of taxis and private hire vehicles to pull in to the side of the road where the drivers had been given a short interview by Licensing Enforcement Officers and PCSOs. The drivers' details and insurances had been checked and their vehicles had been inspected for compliance with the conditions for licensed vehicles required by the Council.

A total of 43 drivers and vehicles had been stopped and checked and two Council suspension notices had been issued, both of which had been resolved the following day.

The report stated that on 7 August 2008 the Licensing section had carried out a joint exercise with TVP in the town centre to check taxis and private hire cars and drivers, the old bus station in Garrard Street had been used. A Vehicle and Operator Services Agency (VOSA) vehicle inspector had also been in attendance and had ensured that the vehicle inspections were conducted according to VOSA

LICENSING APPLICATIONS COMMITTEE MINUTES - 17 SEPTEMBER 2008

requirements for mechanical vehicle safety. An officer from South Oxfordshire District Council's Licensing section had assisted in the exercise, Wokingham District Council officers had been invited but had been unable to attend. In addition representatives from the hackney carriage and private hire trade had also been in attendance.

TVP had provided eight PCSOs and a town centre police officer and two traffic police officers. After a short briefing the exercise had begun at 1915 hours. Police officers had directed drivers of taxis and private hire vehicles to Garrard Street where drivers had been given a short interview by licensing officers and PCSOs. The drivers details and insurances had been checked, their vehicles had been inspected by the VOSA inspector and compliance with conditions for licensed vehicles had been checked.

The exercise had finished at approximately 2230 hours and a total of 96 drivers and vehicles had been checked, this had been made up of 68 taxis, 25 private hire vehicles and 3 vehicles licensed by other Local Authorities. The following faults had been found:

Body work damage	5
Vehicle suspension problems	3
Tyres (on limit depth)	2
Defective lights	2
Fire extinguisher faulty or missing	2

VOSA suspension notices had been issued for the vehicles with suspension problems and for the notice to be lifted each vehicle would have to attend and pass a full new MOT within 10 days.

The report explained that during the exercise an unlicensed driver who had been driving a South Oxfordshire hackney carriage had been cautioned and had been arrested by police for plying for hire, having no hackney carriage driver's badge and no insurance. As a result of his arrest his vehicle had been seized by the police.

The exercise had been a great success and had been welcomed by most of the drivers and passengers that had been on board at the time and a further six exercises of varying scales had been planned prior to April 2009.

The report stated that in order to combat the issue of vehicles and drivers from other Local Authorities illegally plying for hire in Reading the Licensing Enforcement Team had taken the initiative to regularly liaise with licensing staff in other Local Authorities, especially South Oxfordshire and Wokingham as these were the authorities where most vehicles illegally plying for hire in Reading had originated from. Meetings had taken place to ensure that South Oxfordshire officers were aware of the problems that existed in Reading in relation to vehicles and drivers licensed by them and both South Oxfordshire and Wokingham officers were working closely with Reading officers to ensure that effective enforcement took place. Officers from South Oxfordshire and Wokingham did occasionally work in Reading

LICENSING APPLICATIONS COMMITTEE MINUTES - 17 SEPTEMBER 2008

alongside Reading officers which had sent a strong message to their drivers that the Authorities would continue to work together.

The Committee discussed the report and a number of points were raised including the following:

- It was suggested that if private hire firms were encouraged to take a contact number for their customer's disputes over bookings could be more easily resolved. Licensing officers informed the Committee that improvements in technology were already helping in this area as an increasing number of drivers had pda's to which details of their bookings were being sent to them by their operators, enforcement officers could then ask to see the driver's pda to prove they were not plying for hire;
- Licensing Officers informed the Committee that they were scheduled to visit and inspect all private hire operators between September 2008 and April 2009;
- The Committee thanked Licensing Officers and all those who had been involved in the successful covert plying for hire exercises.

Resolved -

- (1) That the report be noted;
- (2) That Licensing Officers and all those who had been involved in the covert plying for hire exercises be thanked.

(The meeting started at 6.33 pm and closed at 6.47 pm.)