

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

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| <b>TO:</b>              | <b>POLICY COMMITTEE</b>                                |                   |   |
| <b>DATE:</b>            | <b>18 MAY 2020</b>                                     |                   |   |
| <b>TITLE:</b>           | <b>REVISION OF HACKNEY CARRIAGE FARES</b>              |                   |   |
| <b>LEAD COUNCILLOR:</b> | <b>COUNCILLOR PAGE</b>                                 | <b>PORTFOLIO:</b> | <b>STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING &amp; TRANSPORT BOROUGH WIDE</b> |
| <b>SERVICE:</b>         | <b>PLANNING, DEVELOPMENT &amp; REGULATORY SERVICES</b> | <b>WARDS:</b>     |   |
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| <b>JOB TITLE:</b>       | <b>PRINCIPAL LICENSING &amp; ENFORCEMENT OFFICER</b>   | <b>E-MAIL:</b>    | <b>clyde.masson@reading.gov.uk</b>                                  |

**1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 From time to time the hackney carriage trade requests that the Council increases the amount they can charge their customers for transportation to their desired destinations, the last of which was in August 2017.

**2. RECOMMENDED ACTION**

- 2.1 That the objection to the fare increase, attached as Appendix V to the report, and summarised in paragraph 5.1.4 be deemed not strictly relevant to the consultation on the Hackney Carriage Fares increase on the grounds set out in paragraph 5.2.2;
- 2.2 That the Hackney Carriage fare increase be allowed to proceed as previously advertised, however the taxi trade be advised that implementation can only take place when it is safe to do so in the present circumstances because it would expose staff to unnecessary risks of engaging with a wide range of people and vehicles.

**Appendices:**

- Appendix I - Current and proposed table of fares

- Appendix II - Letter from the Vice chair Reading Taxi Association
- Appendix III - National fares table
- Appendix IV - Response from RCDA in respect of the proposed fare increase
- Appendix V - Email objection to fare increase
- Appendix VI - Hackney Carriage Vehicle Driver Conditions

### **3.0 BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 The taxi trade requested a fare rise in September 2019 and a report went before the Licensing Committee on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2020 where it was granted subject to an advert being placed in a local newspaper advertising the fare rise and providing the public the opportunity to make objections.
- 3.2 On the 18<sup>th</sup> February 2020 the Licensing Section received an objection to the fare increase from a member of the public (Appendix V). Correspondence has taken place with the objector and a question was submitted by the objector for a recent SEPT meeting (although that meeting did not take place). The objection has not been withdrawn.
- 3.3 As a result of the objection being received and not withdrawn a new hearing was set for 8<sup>th</sup> April for the Licensing Applications Committee to hear the objection against the taxi fare rise and determine the application. Due to the Coronavirus outbreak the 8<sup>th</sup> April 2020 committee hearing was postponed.
- 3.4 Local Government ( Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 65.(4) states: If an objection is duly made as aforesaid and is not withdrawn, the district council shall set a further date, not later than 2 months after the first specified date, on which the table of fares shall come into force with or without modifications as decided by them after consideration of the objections.

### **4.0 POLICY CONTEXT**

- 4.1 The Deputy Director Planning, Transport and Regulatory Services (formerly the Head of Planning, Development and Regulatory Services) has delegated authority to approve and implement hackney carriage fare rises, having taken into account any recommendations expressed by the Licensing Applications Committee or Licensing Applications Sub-Committee 3.
- 4.2 The Deputy Director Planning, Transport and Regulatory Services also has delegated authority to advertise hackney carriage fare rises in a local newspaper, in accordance with the requirements of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976.
- 4.3 Currently in Reading hackney carriage fares are set by the Licensing Committee and all journeys taking place within Reading are paid in accordance with the fares set on the vehicle meter at the end of a journey.

## **5. THE PROPOSAL**

### **5.1 Current Position**

- 5.1.0 A copy of the current table of fares is included as Appendix I.

- 5.1.1 The chair of the Reading Taxi Association (RTA) wrote to the licensing section requesting a fare rise as set out in 2 proposals detailed at Appendix II.
- 5.1.2 Attached as Appendix III is a copy of the National Fare table which is collated by the magazine Private Hire Taxi Monthly (PHTM), the table indicates fares charged in other local authorities and their position in terms of fares charged.
- 5.1.3 Reading Cab Drivers Association (RCDA) was consulted on the proposal from the RTA and the response is in Appendix IV.
- 5.1.4 An objection to the fare increase was received which is attached as Appendix V to the report. The objection is in relation to poor service by drivers not getting out of taxis to assist passengers with the loading and unloading of luggage.
- 5.1.5 A copy of the Hackney Carriage Vehicle Driver conditions are attached as Appendix VI to the report and show conditions in respect of assistance with the loading and alighting of passengers and reasonable amounts of luggage.

## 5.2 Options Proposed

- 5.2.1 The RTA has proposed a fare increase which rather than increasing the flag drop as in previous years, proposes a decrease in the yardage for day time fares only. There is no proposal to decrease the yardage for night time fares. After the flag drop, yardage is proposed to be reduced from 145yds (0-2miles) and 140yds (over 2miles) to 133yds (proposal 1) and 134yds (proposal 2) for all day time distances which equates to an average increase of 3.50% (proposal 1) and 3.99% (proposal 2) over day time fares. As there is no proposal to reduce the yardage for night time fares, the overall average percentage over day and night fares equate reduce to 1.75% (proposal 1) and 1.99% (proposal 2).
- 5.2.2 Officers are minded to support the proposed fare increase. The objection received is not strictly relevant to the issue out for consultation. Nevertheless, the Council is bound to consider it. Whilst the objector may have well founded views on the taxi trade in Reading, the behaviour of individual drivers is not relevant to the general question of what fares should be set by the Council. Had the objection not been received, the proposal for a fare increase would have taken effect. The objector will be advised that specific instances of perceived driver unhelpfulness should be reported to the Licensing Team for advice.
- 5.2.3 In the intervening time, the Coronavirus pandemic has arrived in Reading and this poses a serious practical difficulty. If the Council dismisses the objection and allows the fare increase to proceed, then it needs to action the fare increase in a very practical way. Officers will have to oversee the replacement of programmable chips in the taxi meters in approx. 240 cars. This is not feasible in the present circumstances because it would expose staff to unnecessary risks of engaging with a wide range of people and vehicles.
- 5.2.4 Given the constraints of current circumstances, there are therefore two practical options:

- Disregard the formal objection and allow the fare increase to proceed, however the taxi trade will be advised that implementation can only take place when it is safe to do so.
- Disregard the objection and change tack to refuse the fare increase on the basis that it is not safe to implement. The trade could then apply for an increase again when business is back to normal. This seems to send the wrong signal to the trade when they will be under financial pressure because of the Pandemic.

5.2.5 Officers recommend the first option since this recognises that the Licensing Committee voted to approve the fare increase. The sub-committee was likely to have approved that increase in the face of the single objection received. The first option also recognises that there is a practical difficulty in implementation.

5.2.6 Officers do not recommend the second option since the fare increase is acceptable in all other regards. Bringing the matter back to Committee at another time will incur unnecessary time and cost. As mentioned above, it does not support the taxi trade at a time when the trading environment is challenging.

### **5.3 Other options to be considered**

5.3.1 The Council needs to make a decision on this matter by the end of May, otherwise the applicants have a right of appeal to the Court. It is recommended that Policy Committee makes a decision.

5.3.2 Officers propose to work on a risk assessment with the RTA to ensure a safe system of work for the implementation of the fare increase.

## **6. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS**

6.1 The hackney carriage trade provides a valuable service to the public by being available to transport customers throughout the borough on a 24-hour basis.

### **6.2 Equal Opportunities**

The regulation of hackney carriage fares is one control, which the Council exercises over the use of hackney carriages in Reading. Such controls benefit all sections of the community. The hackney carriage trade provides a valuable service to disabled members of the community, particularly wheelchair users.

### **6.3 Sustainable Implications**

The provision of an adequate number of controlled hackney carriages will encourage the economy of the town and hackney carriages form part of the integrated transport system for the borough. With the availability of an improved public transport system, there will be a reduced need for private motor vehicles, thereby contributing to an improved environment.

### **6.4 Community Safety Implications**

The provision of high quality, controlled hackney carriages, the drivers of which are vetted, allows the public to travel in safety. This reduces both the opportunity for crime and the fear of crime.

## **7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION**

**7.1** Proposed changes to hackney carriage fares are legally required to be advertised in a local newspaper, allowing any person to object to the changes.

**7.2** If objections are submitted these must be considered before any fare changes can be implemented.

## **8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

**8.1** An equality assessment is not required in respect of the increase of hackney carriage fares.

## **9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

**9.1** Section 65 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 empowers the Council to vary the table of fares in connection with the hire of a hackney carriage. The Council is legally obliged to publicise in a local newspaper, details of any variation to the table of fares, and to consider any objections received by way of a further hearing, if they are not withdrawn.

## **10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

**10.1** The cost of publishing the required notices is allowed for in existing budgets.

## **11. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

**11.1** None.