

**STOCKTON-ON-TEES BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**CABINET RECOMMENDATIONS**

**PROFORMA**

Cabinet Meeting .....25th November 2010

1. Title of Item/Report

Scrutiny Review of Taxi Licensing

2. Record of the Decision

Cabinet was reminded that in March 2010, the Housing and Community Safety Select Committee, in its review of Regulatory Services, recommended to Cabinet that the issues raised by the taxi trade in relation to the value for money of the taxi licensing function be considered at a future meeting of the Committee.

Details were submitted of the outcome of such a review undertaken by the Housing and Community Safety Select Committee which considered outstanding issues from the earlier review by examining:

- the resource and funding of the administration and enforcement service including the levels of enforcement and the activities undertaken.
- the vehicle testing station.
- transport planning:
  - o using taxis as part of the public transport service,
  - o the provision of taxi ranks,
  - o the use of bus lanes, and
  - o exemptions from road traffic orders.

All taxi drivers registered in the borough received written notification about the review and were invited to provide the Committee with written evidence before giving additional supporting arguments directly to the Committee at a formal meeting. A number of submissions were subsequently received and representation was made at the public meetings of the Committee.

The reasonableness of the costs levied by the Council's Licensing Department was the predominant element of the review over which the Taxi Trade representatives challenged the department. The Committee was presented with what appeared to be similar arguments and information as had been determined by the District Auditor. As a result the Committee did not reinvestigate this evidence during the review. Financial information presented to the Committee using comparative

costs with other local authorities showed Stockton Council charging the second highest license fees in the region. To fully understand the figures a number of factors needed to be taken into account including the frequency of issuing licenses, the amount of monitoring/policing that takes place, and whether or not this includes 'out of office hours' enforcement.

The turnaround time for plates and licenses was a major issue for the trade although evidence showed that Stockton Council's Licensing Department dealt with 88 per cent of requests within one working day matching or bettering most of the comparison authorities. The need for taxi front plates and door plates that were dated therefore needing to be annually updated, was also questioned. A solution was to issue front and rear plates plus door signs on first licensing/replacing vehicle and only issuing dated rear plates on subsequent renewals. This suggested that a production cost saving of £25-£30 could be achieved for each renewal.

It was noted that when a person sells a vehicle they are required to complete the V5C (vehicle registration) document and send it to the DVLA. The Taxi Trade asked that plates be issued with a 28 day period of grace to produce the V5C prior to the finalising the application process. The Committee agreed with the views of the Council's Legal Department which offered caution to changing the current working practices regarding the way in which the V5C operates when transferring vehicles to another owner. As a result the Committee were of the view that no recommendation for change should be made in this regard.

The trade had been concerned for many years that proposals to increase fees and charges were not subject to independent review asking instead that the final determination of fees be delegated to the Licensing Committee. After consideration by the Committee it was agreed that a lack of transparency and fairness could be seen to exist and therefore the Committee was mindful to give more clarity in this regard.

The Taxi Trade put forward a suggestion that the Council introduce a three-year driver licence to achieve a substantial reduction in administrative costs. Over a three year period a potential saving of £40 could be achieved (in relation to supplies – only two badges issued in three years rather than six) from the £210 total that would currently be incurred. With the possibility of introducing a 3 year licence it was suggested that the department reintroduce annual written reminders for driver licence renewal which could incorporate a pro-forma for the licence but its reintroduction was likely to incur costs.

As a means of improved working arrangements, the trade asked that the garage in Cowpen Lane provide direct notification of testing results to the

licensing staff based in Church Road rather than drivers having to present the documented results. An IT solution at a possible one-off cost (£500) to implement this improvement was considered feasible.

Members and officers were sympathetic to the needs of the taxi trade and their customers at Thornaby Town Centre but as the Council did not own the land in question, it was unable to allocate a taxi rank in the location desired by taxi drivers. Members were therefore eager to see further discussions take place between officers and taxi drivers in order to attempt to overcome this problem.

Taxi Trade representatives informed the Committee that they were still awaiting the outcome of a feasibility study that might allow taxis the use of bus lanes. Some Members were minded to support the use of bus lanes by taxis to improve the speed of moving around the borough. As a result the Committee requested the opportunity to comment on the results of what would now be an in-house study.

RESOLVED that the following recommendations arising from the review of Taxi Licensing be approved:-

1. Operational timescales be introduced, following a feasibility study, to reduce any delays in the production of plates and licenses.
2. Consultation take place and based on the level of support given amend the licence renewal date to align with vehicle testing.
3. Changes be made to taxi vehicle plates to reduce the need for annual updates other than for rear plates following initial vehicle licensing.
4. The final determination of fees be delegated to the Licensing Committee if six or more objections are received.
5. The trade be consulted to determine the support for 3 year licenses and whether they should be compulsory to allow larger cost savings, or optional.
6. The trade be consulted on the reintroduction of reminders/partly completed application forms and introduced if sufficient support is given.
7. Subject to support, CRB renewals be aligned to driver licence renewals.
8. A phased introduction be approved for the production and issuing of driver badges, linked to the licence application and CRB renewal, before an existing badge expires.

9. The appropriate IT equipment be purchased using monies from the Taxi Trading Account to enable electronic documentation transfer from the vehicle testing centre to the Licensing Office.

10. Continued discussions take place involving all relevant parties (including ward councillors) to attempt to identify a suitable location for a taxi rank to serve Thornaby Town Centre.

11. The results of the in-house survey regarding the use of bus lanes by taxis be presented at a future meeting of the Housing and Community Safety Select Committee prior to any decisions being taken.

3. Reasons for the Decision

In order to further improve Stockton Council's position as a local leader within the climate change agenda and assist the reduction of carbon emissions from council buildings.

4. Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None

5. Declared (Cabinet Member) Conflicts of Interest

None

6. Details of any Dispensations

Not applicable

7. Date and Time by which Call In must be executed

By no later than midnight on Friday 3 December 2010.

Proper Officer  
29 November 2010