

FALKIRK COUNCIL

MINUTE of MEETING of the TAXI AND PRIVATE HIRE CAR FORUM held in the MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS, FALKIRK on TUESDAY 11 AUGUST 2015 at 10.00 a.m.

FORUM MEMBERS

PRESENT:

Lennox Ainslie (Bo'ness Community Council); Councillor Jim Blackwood; Laura McNelly (Bruce Taxis); Roy Kerr (Grange Radio Taxis); Jenny McCartney, Falkirk Area Disability Access Panel; Alex Sinclair (Stenhouse T.O.A).

CONVENER:

Councillor Jim Blackwood.

COUNCIL OFFICERS

PRESENT:

Bryan Douglas, Licensing Co-ordinator; Jack Frawley, Committee Services Officer; Kay Minto, Licensing Assistant; Brian Samson, Licensing Enforcement Officer.

1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The convener welcomed those present to the meeting. Members and officers introduced themselves to the meeting.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies were intimated on behalf of:

Alan McFadzean (McFadzean Taxis); Sarah McKenzie, Assistant Town Centre Manager; Gordon Speirs, Fleet Services, and Inspector Christopher Stewart, Police Scotland.

3. MINUTE

Decision

The minute of the meeting of the Taxi and Private Hire Car Forum on 12 May 2015 was approved.

Lennox Ainslie entered the meeting during consideration of the following item of business.

4. TAXI TESTING STATION

Bryan Douglas, Licensing Co-ordinator provided the forum with an update regarding the taxi testing station. He advised that a new MOT test system had introduced and that there had been some teething issues that had been outwith the control of the testing station. There had been issues with the printing of new vehicle registrations and the certificates had a new layout. The forum was advised that training had been put in place for staff to address the issues.

The Forum raised a question about a feasibility study regarding provision of two testing stations and about checks on the competitiveness of the station's pricing. In particular the forum expressed that being able to use private test stations would provide them with better value. Concerns were also expressed by representatives of the taxi trade regarding the customer service provided by the testing station. Bryan Douglas stated that he was not aware of any plans to change the current arrangements. He stated that the forum had previously raised points regarding concerns over performance of the station but did not recollect a request for a feasibility study to be carried out.

In regards to previous concerns over performance the forum stated that there had been reasonable time to see improvements as those comments had been made over a year prior. In relation to specific concerns on a recent test, Bryan Douglas advised the forum that the decision to pass or fail a vehicle was a matter of professional judgement on the part of the testing station.

The forum stated further its concerns regarding the operation of a single testing station; highlighting that this was in effect a monopoly, that the trade were offered no flexibility to correct minor issues rather than retest, and that communication with the office was poor in arranging test slots. Stirling was highlighted as a local authority area with multiple test stations. It was also stated that these issues were raised consistently at every meeting of the forum. Bryan Douglas advised that the decision regarding arrangements for the taxi testing station were the Councils and that the elected members had been consistent in their position that they would monitor the performance of the current station and seek improvements to the service offered. He assured the forum that there was no hidden agenda and that the testing station was not a source of income generation.

The forum stated a number of ways in which the performance of the testing station did not meet the standard of commercial garages. Councillor Blackwood advised the forum that the station was not a commercial garage and that its service was purely to assess the road worthiness of taxi trade vehicles.

The testing of brand new vehicles was raised by the forum and was seen as unnecessary. Bryan Douglas advised the forum that the testing station had been presented with brand new cars which failed their tests and so in ensuring the safety of the public all cars would continue to be tested.

Following discussion on customer service the forum stated that e-mail responses were sometimes an issue. Bryan Douglas asked for clarification on the time delays in receiving responses. The forum advised that sometimes responses were received the same day but that on other occasions there had been a three or four day wait. The forum reiterated its view that there was a need for the Council to look at having another testing station.

In terms of the availability of testing slots the forum stated that the situation had improved but it was not always possible to get the slot requested, even when asking a month in advance. There was also concern expressed regarding the space to manoeuvre at the station which some members felt was an accident waiting to happen.

Bryan Douglas advised the forum that he would take the points raised in relation to the testing station to Gordon Speirs at Fleet Services.

Decision

The Forum noted the update.

5. UPDATE ON REVIEW OF TAXI AND PRIVATE HIRE CAR LICENCE DURATION

The Forum received an update on the review of taxi and private hire car licensing undertaken by a policy development panel. The panel had agreed to recommend to the Executive to consider three year licence duration alongside a one year licence with the possibility that the cost for the three year licence would be discounted. Initial comparisons with other Councils had indicated that the discount would likely be in the region of ten percent but this was subject to calculations of any cost savings.

Councillor Blackwood advised that the panel had also considered the frequency of tests for vehicles up to three years old and were minded to recommend that for these vehicles one test per year would be sufficient. Vehicles over three years old would be required to undertake a test every six months as per the current policy. Bryan Douglas advised that this approach had been benchmarked against other Councils and was found to be in line with national practice.

The forum welcomed the update and recommendations. Councillor Blackwood thanked the forum for their input into the panel's considerations.

Decision

The Forum noted the update.

6. TAXI TARIFF SCALES AND FARES

Bryan Douglas stated that at the last meeting it had been agreed that the trade members would consult their colleagues within the trade on the tariff charges. He advised that the last increase had been in October 2013. He reminded the Forum that two letters of appeal from taxi operators for a greater increase in charges had been received by the Traffic Commissioner but were not upheld. The Traffic Commissioner stated in her findings that the trade would have to justify and evidence any suggested increase to the Council.

The forum stated that there was not a need for an increase to fares at this time, particularly as the cost of fuel had been falling of late.

Bryan Douglas advised the forum that the process of the review of the charges, including the views of the Forum, would be taken forward through presentation to elected members in a report to the Executive.

Decision

The Forum agreed that no increase in fares should be sought at this time and noted the position in terms of the review.

7. CALENDAR METER UPDATE

Bryan Douglas provided the forum with an update and advised that in regard to public holiday dates the licensing office had communicated with the trade and offered meter adjustment arrangements with various meter agents. He stated that resealing of meters had begun and was being carried out by the Licensing Enforcement Officer. Bryan Douglas expressed his thanks to the trade in their assistance in dealing with what had been a difficult circumstance. He stated that some meters had been re-sealed at the testing station as part of the normal test

Decision

The Forum noted the update.

8. ANY OTHER COMPETENT BUSINESS

Bryan Douglas stated that the paper part counterpart to the photocard driving licence was no longer valid. Temporary alternative arrangements had been put in place and applicants for taxi and private hire car licences were being asked for any convictions and fixed penalties. Previously road traffic offences were recorded on the paper licence but that checking mechanism had now gone. Incorporated into the application form would be a request for permission to access driving related history by using an applicant's national insurance number and postcode. This was a national issue for Councils and some had engaged a company to carry out criminal record checks, the cost of which was being met by increasing the application fee. If that was proposed for Falkirk it would be reported to the forum.

Bryan Douglas stated that the fleet manager had recently had discussions with a representative of an electric car firm regarding their use as taxis and asked if the forum wished to receive a presentation on the topic. He advised that the presentation would likely cover areas like the mileage possible and technical advances. The forum agreed to receive the presentation. It was confirmed that a hackney plate could be issued to electric cars.

The forum discussed changes by Renfrewshire Council to their licensing policies to increase the number of wheelchair accessible vehicles by having no application fee for those vehicles. Bryan Douglas advised that in the Falkirk Council area 18.5% of the taxis were wheelchair accessible and that 16% of private hire car vehicles were. The policy development panel had discussed the provision of wheelchair accessible vehicles and sought to find a way to increase the number locally. The panel had expressed interest in consideration of the age policy regarding accessible vehicles.

The forum discussed the recent Tom Jones concert held at Falkirk Stadium. The previous year there had also been a large summer concert where there had been criticism that the arrangements for taxis had not worked well. For this year a temporary taxi rank had been created at the stadium for the event. Forum members had been written to

advising of this arrangement but it was not a successful arrangement as some drivers did not use the turning circle or follow the stewards' instructions.

It was stated that the system was an improvement on the previous year and that with more compliance it may work well. It was suggested that next year a one way system for taxis may be a better solution.

The forum discussed the Glasgow bin lorry crash and medical tests which are required for licensed drivers. The forum expressed that it would be better if an individual's own GP was used as they know your health and medical history best.

Road closures were discussed by the forum and their impact on customers. Bryan Douglas advised that closures were advertised in the local press and through the Council's website.

Bryan Douglas advised the forum that the Council would from this year operate a licensing section closure for the period in between Christmas and New Year but that arrangements were not yet confirmed.

Decision

The Forum agreed to receive a presentation on the use of electric vehicles as taxis.

9. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS DURING 2015

Decision

The forum noted that the next meeting would take place on 18 November 2015.