

Notes of Taxi Drivers Forum 6 March 2019 at 11am

Attended by 8 drivers/operators, Councillor Margaret Harnden, Jill Tyne and Nicola Clarke from Licensing and chaired by Robert Smith, Senior Licensing Officer, Runnymede Borough Council.

Apologies were received from Councillor Jacqui Gracey.

1. Government response to changes to taxi licensing

The Government had responded to the 'task and finish' group's consideration of taxi licensing, resulting in 30 recommendations to regularise the licensing of hackney carriage and private hire. The full document was available on the Council's website in the Taxi news section and people were urged to read it as it would inform future guidance. It was confirmed that Brexit would not affect the matter as the Government would be producing national legislation and for example, Human Rights legislation that was from Europe would be transposed into UK law. Mr Smith gave two examples of recommendations to illustrate it was easily understandable. These were recommendations for training for decision makers (Councillors) and a new requirement for drivers to demonstrate competence in written and spoken English.

2. Consultation on Statutory guidance for licensing Hackney Carriage/Private Hire drivers

Also on the Council's website were details of the Government's consultation on the introduction of statutory guidance for licensing Hackney Carriage and Private Hire drivers. This was aimed at having consistent, national standards for drivers which was viewed positively. People were able to reply to the consultation as individuals, groups and there would be an official reply from Council Officers which was being discussed later in the month. One national standard would apply to all drivers including Uber and London based drivers. This would reduce the opportunity for some applicants to take advantage of lower standards in some licensing authorities. The consultation closes on 22 April and a draft response would be presented to the Council's Regulatory Committee on 20 March. Once the Government had considered all the representations it was thought that statutory guidance would follow fairly quickly as there was a recognised need for it.

3. Uber Court Result

Mr Smith read out the recent Uber court judgement which had been made by the High Court in the case of Uber v Reading Borough Council where 15 drivers had been prosecuted and some had challenged the decision. The case had been dismissed by the High Court as it had been decided that Uber were not soliciting for trade, the vehicle was not displaying and invitation to hire and the driver contract with individuals was irrelevant. This decision was final and licensing authorities and the trade would not be able to challenge it. Drivers found this frustrating, given the high concentration of Uber and similar operating in the borough, especially in the vicinity of Egham Railway station and Royal Holloway. Uber had revised their operating schedule and had divided the country into different geofenced areas. Runnymede was in Uber South East and most of their drivers had been licensed by TFL.

Mrs Tyne advised that private hire drivers could in theory work in London but drivers said this was too expensive and combined with the modern way of booking it was impossible for them to compete.

4. Vehicle renewals

Mr Smith reminded drivers to renew their licenses in a timely way to avoid not being covered. One driver disputed this and said he had requested a callback which he had not received. Mr Smith undertook to resolve this.

5. National register of Hackney Carriage/Private Hire drivers

Mr Smith advised of a new, National drivers' register constructed by the Local Government Association and the National Anti-Fraud Network, that was going to be introduced in April, once some Data Protection details had been finalised. This would allow licensing authorities to check driver details given on application and would show up refusals and revocations given by other licensing authorities if they had entered this information on the register.

6. National Register of Hackney Carriage/Private Hire vehicles

The initiative had been introduced by Defra, to monitor air pollution by hackney carriage and private hire vehicles. It was connected to the emission zones and the Council would have to make weekly updates on the register.

7. Illegal operators/drivers – 'giving friends lifts'

Mr Smith had received reports of drivers taking hires but allegedly giving the impression that they were giving friends lifts and it was not a business transaction. It was agreed that it was very difficult to prove any offence and an example was given where video footage was inconclusive. In the event of an accident, the Police would become involved.

8. Safeguarding training

170 drivers had completed the safeguarding training and a reminder to the 52 drivers to have done the training by 1 May 2019 in order to avoid licenses being suspended or revoked was on the taxi news page on the website.

9. Meter Calibration

Mrs Tyne reminded drivers about tinted glass specifications as 3 vehicles had failed in the last few days which was costly for drivers to rectify and comply with the current requirements.

Mrs Tyne also advised about the need for some meters to be re-calibrated from 1 April when the calendar control would not work if not re-chipped. A local supplier would be re-chipping meters at Gogmore Farm car park in Chertsey the following day. Drivers were advised to contact their dealer to confirm whether their meter needed re-chipping or she or Mr Cox would confirm when vehicles were brought in on renewal if before 1 April. Drivers were reminded that private hire vehicles didn't need to have a meter unless also operating as a hackney carriage.

10. Any other business

Mr Smith advised of slightly reduced fees for driver renewals from 1 April. He also gave the figures for the number of licensed hackney carriage drivers and vehicles in the borough which had both decreased since 2014. Vehicles had decreased from 246 to 166 and drivers from 242 to 186 in 2019. It was considered that the Uber effect was the main reason but a number of drivers had retired in recent months.

Drivers shared experiences of Uber locally. Mrs Tyne said there was work in chauffeuring for example, but this didn't appeal to most drivers.

Councillor Margaret Harnden confirmed that she had followed up the problem raised at the last form about Royal Holloway buses parking up where they shouldn't at Egham Railway Station. Any further issues should be reported to the Estates Management team at Royal Holloway.

Mr Smith thanked everyone for their attendance, the date of the next forum would be confirmed.

The forum finished at 11.55 am.