

At a Meeting of the LICENSING AND REGULATORY COMMITTEE held in the COUNCIL CHAMBER on MONDAY, 26th FEBRUARY, 2024 at 10:00am

Present:-

Councillor Fletcher in the Chair

Councillors Ayre, Chapman, Dodds, Hartnack, Heron, Laverick, Leonard, Mordey, H. Trueman and M. Walker

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillor Reed.

Minutes of the Last Meeting of the Committee held on 29th January, 2024 Part I

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 29th January, 2024 Part I, (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Section 65 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 – Proposed Variation of Hackney Carriage Fares and Other Charges

The Executive Director of City Development submitted a report, (copy circulated), which requested the Committee's consideration of a request received from the Sunderland Hackney Carriage Operators' Association, (SHCOA), dated 31st January, 2024 to increase some elements of the present hackney carriage fares and other charges.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Mrs. Dawn Howley, Principal Licensing Officer, presented the report and drew Members' attention to the proposed changes to the tariffs set out in Paragraph's 4.2 to 4.6 of the report. She drew Members' attention to the average percentage increases of between 6.2 and 6.8 percent and advised that the latest rate of inflation using the Consumer Price Index was 4 percent.

The Chairman introduced Mr Trevor Hines, who was in attendance to address the meeting on behalf of SHCOA. Mr Hines advised that the increasing of fares was always an emotive subject, with drivers wary of increasing fares as this could result in business being lost, but at the same time the costs of operating needed to be able to be covered. From consultation with the trade there had been an overall support for the fares to be increased. There were a lot of increasing costs, including insurance

premiums having increased by 19 percent. The cost of new vehicles had also increased, with wheelchair accessible vehicles being prohibitively expensive.

There were complaints from passengers who could not get a wheelchair accessible vehicle due to the number of vehicles available having reduced. The company Mr Hines works for used to have 34 licensed wheelchair accessible vehicles, but now only has 17. This reduction had resulted in complaints from passengers who wanted to book a larger vehicle as pre-bookings, but these bookings were being refused in order to ensure maximum availability for passengers who required wheelchair access vehicles due to them using wheelchairs. It was a national issue, with new vehicles costing between £40,000 and £70,000 compared with a saloon which would cost up to £30,000.

The age of drivers was increasing, with the average age being 58. These drivers did not want to have to take out significant levels of finance to purchase new vehicles. It was increasingly difficult to attract younger people into the trade.

When the previous tariff increase had been requested inflation had been at 10.5 percent and had remained above the 7.6 percent average increase in fares for around six months. He felt that the proposal being applied for was an acceptable increase in fares.

Councillor H. Trueman expressed his agreement with Mr Hines' statement regarding the increased costs of motoring. He had seen the increase in fuel costs and insurance premiums himself.

Councillor Mordey asked whether it was possible for the Committee to lobby the Government to provide funding for wheelchair accessible vehicles and asked that Officers investigate this. Mrs Howley advised that there was a meeting of the North East Strategic Licensing Group on 10th March, 2024 and she would ensure that this issue was included on the agenda.

Councillor Hartnack referred to the Annual Performance Review Report received at the last Committee Meeting and the increase in the number of complaints that was highlighted in that report. It was a concern that some drivers had been refusing to pick up passengers in wheelchairs. He asked if increased fares would result in increased service levels. He also stated that he knew some drivers were reluctant to have higher fares and that there were concerns about what the public would think of the fare increases. He said he had recently taken a taxi from Seaburn to the City Centre and that relatively short journey had cost £11.00.

In response to Councillor Hartnack Mr Hines stated that if any of the drivers from within his company refused to take a wheelchair, or accept card payment then disciplinary action would be taken. He received complaints about drivers from other companies and independent drivers and it appeared to him that it was independent drivers who were more likely to break the rules around picking up wheelchair using passengers, or accepting cards. It had always been the case that some drivers would be wary of fare increases and he agreed that the public should be asked for their views. There were drivers who felt that fares should be increased as a result of the amounts companies such as Uber charged. He knew of a couple of cases where Uber had charged over £100.00 for a journey that would have been around £20.00 in

a hackney carriage. This had led some hackney carriage drivers feeling that at peak times they were not able to charge enough.

A Councillor also raised the issue of social media being used to promote the proposed changes.

The Committee's Solicitor, Mr David Thompson, advised that there was a statutory process to be followed, (under Section 65 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976), which provided for a consultation period during which any interested parties, including licensed drivers and the public, could submit representations and objections about proposed changes to fees and other charges. The tariffs set by the Council were the maximum that a driver could charge, i.e. an individual driver could choose to charge a lower fare if they so wished. At the meeting Members were not being asked to approve changes to fares, or other charges, but were simply being asked to approve the advertisement of the proposed changes, so that they could be subject to the statutory consultation process. Depending upon whether any objections were received to the proposals, the Committee may be required to decide whether the proposals were to be implemented, or not. Mr Thompson also advised that in addition to the statutory consultation process, the Council's social media and website could be used to highlight the consultation process that was to be undertaken.

2. RESOLVED that the following proposed increases be subject to the statutory advertising requirements, :-
 - a. An increase in the Tariff 1 charges as set out in Paragraph 4.2;
 - b. An increase in the Tariff 2 charges as set out in Paragraph 4.3;
 - c. An increase in the Tariff 3 charges as set out in Paragraph 4.4;
 - d. An increase to charges for waiting time as set out in Paragraph 4.5;
 - and
 - e. An increase in the soiling charge as set out in Paragraph 4.6

Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006

3. RESOLVED that, in accordance with Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded during consideration of the remaining business as it was considered likely to include the disclosure of exempt information relating to an individual and the financial or business affairs of a particular person (including the Authority holding that information). (Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A, Part I, Paragraphs 1 and 3).

(Signed) J. FLETCHER,
Chairman.

Note:-

The above minutes comprise only those relating to items during which the meeting was open to members of the public.

Additional minutes in respect of further items are included in Part II.

