

MINUTES of the meeting of Regulatory Committee held at The Council Chamber, Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Friday 27 April 2012 at 10.00 am

Present: Councillor JW Hope MBE (Chairman)

Councillors: CM Bartrum, PL Bettington, EMK Chave, RB Hamilton, Brig P Jones CBE, PJ McCaull and C Nicholls

In attendance: Councillors JLV Kenyon

26. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors BA Durkin, RC Hunt, FM Norman and G Powell.

27. NAMED SUBSTITUTES (IF ANY)

Councillor EMK Chave was appointed named substitute for Councillor FM Norman and Councillor RB Hamilton was appointed named substitute for Councillor RC Hunt.

28. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made at the meeting.

29. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 21st February, 2012 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

30. TO CONSIDER OBJECTIONS TO PROPOSED INCREASES TO THE TAXI LICENCE FEES AND CHARGES

A report was presented by the Acting Head of Environmental Protection and Licensing about objections which had been received from the trade to the proposed increase in hackney carriage/private hire licence fees and charges for 2012/2013. He explained that the increases were aimed at full cost recovery so that the service was no longer subsidised. This was in line with a resolution previously made by Cabinet regarding all the services provided by the Council. He outlined the approach used in calculating the fees and charges, the comparisons made with other councils and the advice that had been received from the accountants and external consultants.

The Acting Head of Environmental Protection and Licensing outlined the advertising process which had been followed regarding the proposals and consultation with the trade and public. He provided a summary of the responses which had been received. He said that the trade had also enquired about a taxi marshalling scheme whereby officers would queue and direct taxis to collect passengers leaving clubs in the Commercial Road area of Hereford. The cost of this was likely to be £52 per hackney carriage to be cost neutral to the council tax payer. Although there had been a number of supportive comments for such a scheme, overall the consultation responses indicated that the trade were not prepared to cover its cost. The

Acting Head of Environmental Protection and Licensing was not therefore recommending the introduction of the Scheme. He also said that since the consultation process had started, revised corporate support service costs had become available which had enabled the original proposed fee increases to be significantly reduced but still enable full cost recovery. He explained the options available to the Committee in considering the proposals.

The Chairman invited comments from the trade and allocated ten minutes per speaker. Mr Jones, Mr Lane and Mr Preen spoke on behalf of the trade. The trade were very unhappy about the level of the proposed increases in a difficult financial climate for them. They contested a number of aspects and in particular the calculations involved. They did not feel these accurately reflected the number of licences issued by the Council and the revenue it obtained from them. Their main areas of complaint were:

- too many taxi licences and this is a way to put people out of business;
- there are 250 taxis but only 30 rank spaces for them;
- the representatives did not feel that all the points that they had made as part of the consultation process were properly reflected in the report;
- the proposed increases seem exceedingly high; more information needed to be provided about how the costs were arrived at;
- the increases were excessive given the fuel and operational costs facing the trade;
- the headline figures had been provided in the report but not the detail by way of a spread sheet mentioned by the officer;
- fees should be reduced during a time of recession to help a vital service to the public;
- there should be greater emphasis on cutting red tape;
- the £30 medical check was excessive, especially to the over 65's who have to have an annual check;
- more time should be given to enable all the relevant facts to be compiled to enable more accurate figures to be arrived at;
- the latest audit which showed the increases needed to be provided as part of the assessment;
- Hereford was a small city and should not be compared with larger ones for the fee comparison;
- were the resources of the licensing department used in the right way?;
- the impact on the cost to the licence payer of the various premises moves the Council has made over the last few years should be shown;
- could the Council demonstrate that value for money was being given?;
- there was a very inefficient system for making contact with the licensing department;

- not all of their comments were reflected in the report;
- many drivers were already on a very low income and had to seek charitable assistance;
- in today's economic climate the Council needed to set its spending at a more realistic level; and
- the rises were well above inflation and the Council is not imposing a council tax rise this year. Licensing now operated from a shared office therefore costs should be reduced. We have looked at neighbouring Council's and found that Herefordshire's costs are high given the demographics of the County. The increases will only have a detrimental result on a trade already struggling with an economic down-turn, and the net effect will be loss of jobs, less maintenance and longer driving hours – some firms may have to lay off drivers and the proprietor increase his driving hours.

Councillor JVL Kenyon one of the local ward members spoke on behalf of his constituents in the trade. He felt that there was a need for more work to be done in arriving at the charges and felt that the matter should be deferred for consideration by Overview and Scrutiny.

The Committee discussed the various points that had been made and the Acting Head of Environmental Protection and Licensing answered some of the questions which had been raised by the trade. The Committee noted the need for a decision to be made as soon as possible because of the budgetary implications involved. On balance it was felt that there was a need for further discussions to be held with the trade and that this should be by way of the Member/Officer/Trade Working Group in the first instance.

A proposal that the matter should be deferred was not seconded. It was decided instead that the recommendation should be approved in principle but that a meeting should be held with the trade prior to a decision being made.

RESOLVED

THAT:

- (a) **the Committee approves in principle the recommendation to increase the fees as set out in the report of the Acting head of Environmental Protection and Licensing; subject to the figures provided in Appendix 2 being further reviewed while considering any background papers not previously made available to the Committee;**
- (b) **a meeting be held between interested parties with the intention of securing agreement if possible; and**
- (c) **the Committee to sit and consider the meeting's findings at the earliest opportunity thereafter.**

31. DATE OF NEXT MEETING - 8TH MAY 2012

The meeting ended at 11.30 am

CHAIRMAN