

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL
GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE
MINUTES

Date: Monday, 30 October 2023

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Claire Parris (Chair), Maureen McKay (Vice-Chair), Nazmin Chowdhury, Michael Downing, Chris Howells, Graham Lawrence CC, Mrs Joan Lloyd, Lin Martin-Haugh, Margaret Notley, Graham Snell and Anne Wells.

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm
Time: End Time: 6.30pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Sandra Barr.

Councillor Chris Howells declared a personal interest in Item 3 – Review of Hackney Carriage Limit, as he was a Taxi Driver licensed by Transport for London.

2 MINUTES - 13 JULY 2023

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the General Purposes Committee held on 13 July 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 REVIEW OF HACKNEY CARRIAGE LIMIT

The Environmental Health Commercial & Licensing Manager presented a report from the Licensed Vehicle Surveys and Assessment (LVSA) in relation to unmet demand for hackney carriage and rank provision in the Borough. In the light of this report, the Committee was requested to review the Council's current policy of limiting Hackney Carriage Vehicle (HCV) licence numbers.

The Environmental Health Commercial & Licensing Manager advised that the Council currently restricted the number of hackney carriage vehicle licences issued at any one time to 100. At a meeting between the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee and the Commercial and Licensing Manager in October 2022, it was agreed that an unmet demand survey be undertaken in order to inform Members regarding future policy on the limitation of hackney carriage licence numbers. Following this, officers commissioned an independent consultant, Licensed Vehicle Surveys and Assessment (LVSA), to carry out this work, which was completed between November 2022 and February 2023. The consultant's report was attached as Appendix A to the officer report.

The Environmental Health Commercial & Licensing Manager outlined the main findings of the consultant's report as follows:

- There was no evidence of any unmet demand in the Stevenage area which was significant and required the issue of any further standard hackney carriage licences at the present time.
- There had been an estimated 44% overall reduction in passenger numbers since the last survey in 2017.
- While app-based providers appear to have gained market share, there was also clear evidence that the hackney carriage trade appeared to have remained relatively resilient, in contrast to the decline in private hire vehicle numbers.
- There remained a need for a central area rank.
- Comparing the latest national rail usage to the estimated rank passenger departures suggested 10% of all rail arrivals at Stevenage station departed using hackney carriages from the rank there. Compared to the previous survey, rail passenger numbers were down 30%, whereas for the same period rank passengers were down 36%, a relatively similar figure.
- Despite this, the issue of poor service to these customers remained at the train station rank. The rank was privately operated by Great Northern Railways and they permitted hackney carriages/taxis to ply for hire. There was a monthly fee licensed drivers paid to access the rank. It was at this rank that unmet demand was seen.

The Environmental Health Commercial & Licensing Manager stated that the consultant's report recommended:

- There was a need to identify a new town centre rank and encourage its use. This needed work between the trade, the Council, Highways Authority and the shopping centre to work out ways that appropriate signing and advertising could be undertaken.
- The issue of poor service to a small number of vulnerable people requiring accessible vehicles must be dealt with to enable them to travel safely and appropriately – this mainly related to ensuring the good provision in the hackney carriage fleet could be accessed by those preferring to book vehicles in advance.
- The option of a demonstration day for wheelchair and other accessible vehicles could be considered. This would allow the trade, councillors and those needing access to such vehicles either for themselves or for clients, such as care home representatives, to interact and build good will in this very important area. LVSA believed that this option would produce more positive results than any immediate issue of further wheelchair accessible vehicle licences.
- Within these discussions there may be need for agreeing a clear way that wheelchair accessible capable vehicles were clearly identified, e.g. with some form of label as some authorities provide (e.g. Leeds). The issue of producing a list of wheelchair vehicles and drivers should also be seriously considered and the conclusions of this publicised.

- These factors could be drawn together in an Integrated Service Plan, as recommended by the currently draft new Best Practice Guidance.

The Environmental Health Commercial & Licensing Manager commented that, on the basis of the evidence gathered in the unmet demand survey, the key conclusion was that there is no evidence of any unmet demand for the services of hackney carriages, either patent or latent, which was significant at this point in time in the Stevenage Borough Council licensing area.

The Environmental Health Commercial & Licensing Manager advised that the options available for the Committee were: Option 1 – retain the current limit of 100 hackney carriage vehicles; Option 2 – increase the number of hackney carriage licences gradually by a process of managed growth; or Option 3 – de-limit numbers completely.

In response to a number of Members' questions, the Environmental Health Commercial & Licensing Manager, assisted by the Senior Environmental Health & Licensing Manager, stated:

- The survey had highlighted that the Westgate/Danestrete Taxi ranks were underused during the day, possibly as a result of the recent Bus Station relocation. There were no fixed plans at the current time as to the possible location of a new rank closer to the Bus Station;
- Officers would investigate the possibility of the installation of a phone in town centre location to assist users in phoning for hackney carriages (similar to that operated by the town centre branch of Tesco for the calling of Private Hire vehicles);
- The option to de-limit hackney carriage numbers was not recommended in the consultant's report, as there was no evidence of any unmet demand in the Stevenage area;
- The survey had focussed on taxi journeys within the Borough of Stevenage, although drivers were able to undertake journeys outside of the Borough boundary;
- The aspiration for all Hackney Carriages to be wheelchair accessible was not feasible, as many disabled users without wheelchairs often had physical difficulty in accessing such vehicles and generally preferred non-converted vehicles; and
- The Council was able to cover its costs in the administration of the licensing of Hackney Carriage and Private Hire vehicles, but was not permitted by Central Government Guidance to make a profit.

Upon the matter being put to the vote, the majority of the Committee supported the recommendations set out in the report, including the retention of the current limit of 100 hackney carriage vehicles and licences in Stevenage (Option 1).

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That LSVA's recommendation at Section 9, first paragraph, page 55, of their report, to retain the current limit of 100 hackney carriage vehicles and licenses in Stevenage, be approved.

2. That LSVA's recommendations regarding rank provision, as set out in the second paragraph on page 55 of their report, be agreed.
3. That the siting of a new town centre taxi rank, following the relocation of the bus station, be investigated with partners and stakeholders.
4. That further assistance be provided to persons requiring wheelchair accessible vehicles to source and book them within Stevenage.

4 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

None.

5 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Not required.

6 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR