

LICENSING COMMITTEE

21 March 2023

Present:

Councillor Bob Foale (Chair)
Councillors Asvachin, Ellis-Jones, Holland, Newby, Parkhouse, Rees, Snow and Wright

Apologies:

Councillors Warwick, Mitchell, K, Oliver, Vizard and Wood

Also present:

Service Lead - Environmental Health & Community Safety, Principal Licensing Officer,
Legal Advisor, Apprentice Solicitor and Democratic Services Officer (SLS)

12 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 31 January 2023 were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as correct.

13 **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) 1976 AND TOWN AND POLICE CLAUSES ACT 1847

14 **Exeter Licensed Vehicle Mystery Shopping December 2022 - Survey**

The Principal Licensing Officer presented the report, and referred to a series of mystery shopper test purchases commissioned by Exeter City Council, undertaken from Thursday 8 December to Sunday 11 December 2022. The survey included the hire of Hackney Carriages from ranks in Exeter and pre-booked Private Hire Vehicles made via telephone, mobile app and booking offices. The premise of the survey was to establish a snapshot of the customer experience in using Exeter's taxis. An overview of the observations from the mystery shopper exercise was attached as an appendix to the report. It was noted that the details of each test purchase undertaken would be presented as a Part 2 report, as part of the agenda.

The survey made the following observations:-

- Covid had an ongoing impact on the availability of drivers going forward;.
- the availability of both Hackney Carriage taxis on the ranks and private hire vehicles on the circuit was more restrictive than during previous surveys;
- the test purchases were made in such a way as to ensure the identity of the mystery shopper exercise was not revealed;
- a number of Hackney Carriage test purchases were for short distance journeys to verify passenger comments that drivers were reluctant to undertake shorter trips. It was noted that no requests for short distance journeys were refused, although a small number of drivers added an additional charge; and
- during one test purchase, the mystery shopper was unwilling to accept the request to share the taxi journey.

- there was one instance of a private hire test purchase trip made without pre-booking.

The Service Lead - Environmental Health and Community Safety responded to a comment on the limited number of taxi firms operating in Exeter and stated that whilst market forces prevailed, the experience in Exeter of individual private hire operators amalgamating into larger companies across a locality was reflected across the country. It was noted that currently, 64 operators were licensed with the City Council, many being sole drivers fulfilling school transport contracts for Devon County Council.

The Principal Licensing Officer also responded to the following questions:-

- the Member suggestion of the increased demand for taxis, could relate to the post Covid and Brexit experience, and the poor bus service in the city was noted;
- a separate report which included driver statistics was being prepared for the Department of Transport (DfT) and had identified 362 active licenced vehicles operating;
- although not relevant to Exeter, the mystery shop survey still included a reference to on line taxi operators, Ola who no longer had a presence and similarly Uber who had never operated in Exeter, as part of a national format;
- both male and female mystery shopper operatives were used. All taxi drivers were required to undertake safeguarding training within 12 months of driving with a further requirement to renew every five years. The training included awareness for vulnerable passengers and particularly lone females;
- Hackney carriages could be hailed, both from the street and the rank, an illuminated roof light indicating their availability;
- Devon County Council Highways Authority have sought the Licensing team's support to coordinate consultation with the taxi trade to upgrade or reinstate a number of taxi ranks in the city;
- Taxi Marshalls helped manage queues on the ranks during the busy Saturday evening; and
- recent initiatives including the installation of CCTV had improved standards in Hackney Carriages and future legislation may make this a requirement in Private Hire Vehicles.

The Service Lead - Environmental Health and Community Safety agreed that passenger safety and safeguarding was an important matter and both licensed taxi drivers, and other partners had a part to play in a contribution particularly in the night time economy. The Safety of Women at Night Charter (SwaN) was about to be relaunched, and the Licensing team would continue to work with representatives of the taxi trade.

A Member's comment that passengers may wish to use a taxi for varying reasons, including vulnerability was noted. All taxi drivers were invited to take part in Equality and Diversity training and he extended an invitation to Licensing Committee Members.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

15 **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 - Exclusion of Press and Public**

RESOLVED that, under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the consideration of the following item on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 1 of Part I, Schedule 12A of the Act.

16 **Exeter Licensed Vehicle Mystery Shopping December 2022 - Survey Results**

The Principal Licensing Officer presented the report and stated that although a number of issues were raised, there were also many examples of good service offered by the taxi trade in Exeter.

The Chair also welcomed the report and agreed with fellow Members, that whilst there were a small number of issues to address, the taxi trade should be thanked for the service provided. The Principal Licensing Officer would pass on Members' comments.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 6.20 pm

Chair