

TITLE OF REPORT: Proposed Vehicle Licensing Review

REPORT OF: Paul Dowling, Strategic Director, Communities and Enterprise

Purpose of the Report

1. To commence discussions with Regulatory Committee Members on a planned review of Vehicle Licensing.

Background

2. Both Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Vehicles are required to be licensed by the Council. The licences are issued annually. In order to be granted a licence initially the vehicle must meet certain criteria. If the vehicle does not meet one or more of the criteria the Constitution allows the vehicle proprietor to have their application considered by Committee who can decide to grant a licence based on the individual circumstances of the case.

Vehicle requirements

3. There are a range of requirements that must be met in order for a licence to be granted under delegated powers, this includes that:
 - The vehicle must be under three years old
 - The vehicle must pass an examination by a Council vehicle examiner
 - The vehicle must comply with the Council's standard conditions

Current position

4. There are currently 708 vehicles in the Council's taxi fleet, of these 211 are Hackney Carriages and 497 are Private Hire Vehicles. Since Officers' delegated powers to approve vehicles over three years old were removed, there have been 6 applications to add a vehicle to the fleet aged over three. Of these 5 have been approved and 1 has been refused. There have also been 14 vehicles aged 8 years that have applied for a one year extension to their Licence which is still dealt with under delegated powers.

Direction of change

5. As with all policies changes in circumstances, including changes in legislation and the advent of new technology mean that they need to be updated and improved. The Council are proposing to begin a review of the Vehicle Licence policies for a number of different reasons. Some of the main reasons are set out below.

Emissions

6. Vehicle technology has evolved significantly resulting in cleaner more efficient engines and lower emissions. It is proposed that any changes to the Vehicle Policies would enshrine the need to have a fleet which adopts the latest and cleanest vehicle technology as it emerges, particularly improvements relating to Nitrogen Dioxide and Particulate Matter. These pollutants are particularly harmful to health. Nitrogen Dioxide is a specific cause for concern in Gateshead Town Centre, with an Air Quality

Management Area (AQMA) having been declared due to exceedances of permissible levels.

New technology

7. It is recognised that new technology is always being developed, the electric car and the driverless car are just two examples. The Council is keen to support innovation and the use of new technology where there are clear benefits and where there is no risk to public safety. It is suggested that any changes to the Vehicle Policies would support this position. As an example of how this may develop in practice the Council have made a bid to the Departments for Transport and Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for an Air Quality Grant to support the introduction of a number of measures aimed at improving air quality in the Borough, which will include measures relating to the Hackney Carriages and Private Hire Vehicles that the Council licenses; this could include for example the installation of vehicle charging points in taxi waiting areas.

Vehicle safety

8. Standards of vehicle safety are constantly changing and vehicles are becoming increasingly safer for both those travelling in them and pedestrians who may come into contact with them. It is proposed that any changes to the Vehicle Policies would be made with a view to improve the safety of the vehicles being added to the fleet.

Passenger safety

9. There have been a number of recent high profile cases where taxis and more generally the taxi trade have become embroiled in cases of child sexual exploitation. Within our own area Northumbria Police has conducted an operation into such matters. As part of the recommendations from other areas and the suggestions being made by Northumbria Police new measures to protect passengers such as CCTV are being considered.

Cross border issue

10. There is a clear issue, which has recently been highlighted in the national press, that efforts to increase standards in one area can be undermined if other areas do not introduce equivalent policies. For example the maximum age that a vehicle can be licensed could be 8 in one area but if in an adjoining area the limit was for example 15 this vehicle could still work in the area with the 8 year limit through sub-contracting arrangements.
11. In July 15 the North East Public Protection Partnership document entitled 'Working together to make taxis safer across the region' set out agreed actions for the 12 North East authorities to achieve consistent and complimentary policies for vehicles.
12. The Department for Transport have indicated that they will be issuing statutory guidance to licensing authorities under new powers to be introduced through the Policing and Crime Bill, and it is anticipated that this will refer to CCTV as being best practice following the examples set by Southampton, Warrington, Northumberland, etc.

Conclusion

13. There is a clear need to review and update the Vehicle Licence Policies. It is proposed that a preliminary review is conducted and proposed amendments in the form of an

initial draft are then circulated for comments to Committee Members prior to undertaking a more formal and full scale consultation following approval from Cabinet. In addition, it is proposed to work with the North East Strategic Licensing Group on cross-border issues and to attempt to develop region-wide consistency with policies.

Recommendation

14. It is recommended that the Committee note the report and provide any comments they have in relation to the proposed way forward.

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Appendix 1

Resources

Financial Implications – None

Human Resources Implications – None.

Property Implications - None

Risk Management Implications – None.

Equality and Diversity Implications – None

Crime and Disorder Implications – None.

Health Implications – None.

Sustainability Implications – None

Human Rights Implications – None

Area and Ward Implications – No specific area or ward implications.

Background Information

Private Hire Vehicle Policy

Hackney Carriage Vehicle Policy

