

## **LICENSING COMMITTEE**

**15 March 2017**

Present: Councillor K Crout (Chair)  
Councillor J Fahmy (Vice-Chair)  
Councillors S Bolton, A Dychton, K Hastrick, M Hofman,  
Ahsan Khan, B Mauthoor, A Rindl, G Saffery, D Scudder and  
M Turmaine

Also present: Councillor J Dhindsa  
Zahir Ahmed, Watford Hackney Carriage Drivers Association  
Adil Butt, Watford Hackney Carriage Drivers Association  
Leigh Hutchins, Disability Watford

Officers: Head of Democracy and Governance  
Environmental Health and Licensing Section Head  
Environmental Health Manager (Commercial)  
Business Compliance Officer  
Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (AG)

### **12 Apologies for absence/ committee membership**

Apologies were received from Councillors Connal, Laird and Mills.

The Chair extended best wishes to Councillor Mills, on behalf of the committee, who was presently in hospital following an accident.

### **13 Disclosure of interests (if any)**

There were no disclosures of interest.

### **14 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 January 2017 were submitted and signed.

## Discussion on use of magnetic door signs for hackney carriages

The Committee received a report of the Head of Community and Customer Services. The Chair reminded members of the role of the committee with regard to the recommendation in the report. The Business Compliance Officer introduced the report – reading the document to the committee.

In response to questions from members, the Business Compliance Officer:

- Informed the committee that he did not have crime data for the current year but the figures showed a rise in 2015/16 from previous years (and these rises could occur in spikes). He would be able to supply the latest figures if necessary. He advised that it should be possible to show the percentage of crimes against taxis compared to the overall figures for theft from motor vehicles offences - and whether increases against all types of vehicles were comparable to increases against taxis.
- Advised that the cost of a pair of door signs was £19.50.
- Explained that a warning could be given in the first instance when door signs were not displayed – although the licence could also be suspended. If steps were not then taken to display the sign the licence could be revoked; but this had not happened to date.
- Clarified that the roof sign did not identify the vehicle as a Borough of Watford taxi – the signs were universal. It would be problematical to incorporate a Watford design. For example, it would be difficult for CCTV to pick out small lettering. However, the Borough crest on the door signs was identifiable as relating to Watford.
- Agreed to provide a break-down of theft from motor vehicle offences by month to the committee.
- Advised that it may be possible to consider a design feature to help ensure door signs remained affixed to vehicles; but there would be a need to take in to account the likely increased cost.
- Explained that few surrounding districts required taxis to have liveries - and door signs were not a national requirement. However, taking account of the disability issues, having the door signs was not necessarily inappropriate.
- Informed the committee how the licensing service was able to assist the police in identifying vehicles.

Members agreed that Councillor Dhindsa, although not a member of the committee, may make submissions and ask questions.

In response to further questions from members, the Business Compliance Officer,

- Informed the committee that the stealing of door signs, to be used on another vehicle to give the appearance of a taxi, had been considered when the signs had been introduced. However, a vehicle would also need a roof sign and back plate to have the appearance of a bona-fide taxi.
- Clarified that the most visible vehicle taxi sign during the hours of darkness was the lit roof sign.

The Chair confirmed that members had received the written submission from the Watford Hackney Carriage Drivers Association and invited Mr Ahmed to address the committee.

Mr Ahmed explained that the door signs presented a range of problems to drivers. The signs suffered wear and tear in the elements including the peeling off of the livery. The constant removal of the signs resulted in expensive damage to a vehicle's paintwork; such as scratching. With the door signs affixed when a vehicle was being used privately it had the appearance of a taxi - with problematical attendant issues. As the signs were magnetic they tended to blow off on motorways; they were often removed by children or simply stolen. Drivers had to bear the cost of replacement. The signs attracted thieves who would look for loose cash in vehicles; this had apparently occurred on several occasions in Watford during the last week.

Mr Ahmed suggested that the signs did nothing to assist with public safety; people knew if a vehicle was a taxi by the sign on the roof with the light on. Furthermore, drivers wore badges with their photograph and there were plates on the rear of the vehicle with the Watford Borough Council identifiable number displayed thereon. Consequently, the door signs were unnecessary. He said that no other local borough required door signs to be displayed and gave an example of taxis in Hemel Hempstead that simply had signs on the roof. He concluded that most drivers used executive type cars and that the door signs detracted from their appearance.

Mr Butt addressed the committee explaining that there were no health and safety issues by having the Watford Borough Council crest on vehicles. He reiterated that a lot of damage was caused to vehicles when removing the door signs resulting in expensive repair bills for drivers.

In response to questions from members, Mr Ahmed:

- Suggested that larger door signs might be more likely to blow off whilst a car was moving.

- Advised that roof signs could be taken off and secured in the boot. There was no problem with damage to the vehicle when these were removed.
- Explained that he had had two pairs of door signs lost in the past year.

In response to a question from Mr Hutchins, the Chair explained that it was a matter for drivers to determine how they managed their tax affairs.

The Chair thanked Mr Ahmed and Mr Butt for their contribution and invited Mr Hutchins to address the committee.

Mr Hutchins explained that the chair of the Taxi Users Association had not experienced problems with door signs nationally. He added that it was not just the visually impaired who needed the door signs but people with learning difficulties and the elderly also. It was important the vehicles could be easily identified as taxis.

Goggles were provided to members so they could experience the difficulties visually impaired people had in recognising taxis. Coloured cards were also used to show how the colour contrast of the door signs helped identify a vehicle as a taxi.

Mr Hutchins explained that his organisation wanted increased livery on taxis and not less. He suggested that taxi drivers who were opposed to livery on their vehicles could consider working for private companies. He explained that he used to be in the motor trade and that it was user error that caused scratches on vehicles when the door signs were removed. He felt that that signs would not fall off vehicles if they were affixed properly.

Mr Hutchins wished the taxi service to be user friendly and considered that not requiring the use of door signs was going in the wrong direction - the only items that readily identified a vehicle as a taxi were the door and roof signs. He suggested that if there was really a problem with the door signs falling off there would be more publicity about the issue in the media. He considered that it would be more appropriate for drivers to only use their vehicles as taxis and not in a private capacity.

In response to questions from members, Mr Hutchins:

- Agreed that having noise recognition in taxis was a good idea but background noise might be a problem.
- Explained how totally blind people would find taxis in the community (four or five percent of the 360 thousand visually impaired people

nationally were completely blind). However, over 50% of disabled people in Watford did not venture from their homes because of transportation issues.

- Advised that the partially sighted and people with learning difficulties needed good signage so that a vehicle could be recognised as early as possible as a taxi.
- Asserted that a taxi's roof sign was not the most visible means of identification for the disabled. The door sign was very important and would be visible from the side. A roof sign was also less clear to a person seated in a wheel chair as the individual was situated lower than if standing.
- Informed the committee that Uber vehicles were not particularly accessible to the disabled. Similarly, smart phone apps could be hard to use – particularly for older people.
- Explained how a film could be placed over a vehicle's paintwork to help prevent damage when door signs were removed.

The Chair thanked Mr Hutchins for his contribution and opened the subject for debate by members. They began by discussing how signage prevented taxis from elsewhere plying for hire in the borough.

In response to a question from members, the Business Compliance Officer clarified that the magnet on roof signs was very strong (and constructed in a large block) - that helped prevent the sign falling off whilst the taxi was moving.

Members requested that the next report should include information on what signage and livery was used on taxis in surrounding districts and what proportion of Uber drivers operated in Watford. The Business Compliance Officer commented that whilst it may be possible to obtain the Uber data, it should be borne in mind that Uber vehicles were a private fleet and it was unclear whether any useful comparison could be drawn in respect of hackney carriages.

Members asked for more information on the safety of the door signs for the future meeting. The Chair commented that he was aware of a piece of work carried out by Kris Beuret of Social Research Associates, a specialist transport advisory organisation, in this regard and would like to have their views on where similar door signs may have worked well elsewhere for the next meeting.

Members asked how, fundamentally, disabled people would recognise a taxi - and what advantage the door signs were to them. Some members felt

it would seem logical that the lit roof sign would be the prime recognition method. The Business Compliance Officer undertook to include this information in the future report.

Members commented that the issue of the door signs was a difficult matter. They discussed the role of the council in promoting public safety and ensuring that the taxi trade worked both for the drivers and the whole community (including all ranges of disability and ages).

They reiterated that the next report should look in depth at roof signage - as this seemed a prominent issue. The impact of the door signs on the business of drivers using executive style vehicles should also be considered. It was suggested that there should be sympathy for drivers who spent their working day in vehicles with livery in relation to which they felt uncomfortable.

Members ended by discussing whether evidence had been provided that indicated that the door signs made taxis any safer. An example was given as to how taxi drivers would prevent non-taxis making use of taxi ranks. Some members considered it pertinent that drivers were able to use their vehicles in a private capacity as this obviated them owning more vehicles leading to further parking and congestion problems.

The Chair concluded by informing the committee that a further report would now be awaited and he emphasised that this should include research on whether it would be possible to make the sign on the roof of taxis more identifiable.

RESOLVED that –

1. the views of the taxi trade and Disability Watford be noted.
2. officers come back to a future committee having undertaken further consultation with stakeholders and an equality impact analysis with recommendations on whether or not the vehicle condition should be altered.
3. the actions requested be undertaken.

Chair  
Licensing Committee

The meeting started at 7.30 p.m.  
and finished at 8.50 p.m.