

Crawley Borough Council

Minutes of Licensing Committee

Tuesday, 12 September 2023 at 7.00 pm

Councillors Present:

I Ashraf (Chair)

Z Ali (Vice-Chair)

M L Ayling, T G Belben, D Crow, J Hart, I T Irvine, K L Jaggard, M G Jones, Y Khan,
K McCarthy, A Nawaz and B Noyce

Officers Present:

Georgina Bouette Head of Community Services

Kareen Plympton Team Leader - Health, Safety and Licensing

Jess Tamplin Democratic Services Officer

Astrid Williams Senior Lawyer (Solicitor)

Apologies for Absence:

Councillor B J Burgess

Absent:

Councillor D M Peck

1. Disclosures of Interest

No disclosures of interests were made.

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Licensing Committee held on 12 June 2023 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3. Licensing Sub-Committee Minutes

The minutes of the Licensing Sub-Committee held on 22 June 2023 – Application for the Review of the Premises Licence for Saad News, 8 Brighton Road, Crawley, RH10 6AA (Southgate Ward) – were approved as a correct record and signed by Councillor Irvine as Chair of the Sub-Committee panel.

4. Public Question Time

There were no questions from members of the public.

5. Proposed Fees and Charges for 2023 - Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Regime

The Committee considered report [HCS/063](#) of the Head of Community Services. The Health, Safety and Licensing Team Leader presented the report, which set out proposals for an increase in the fees and charges related to the hackney carriage and private hire licensing regime. The Committee was requested to determine whether the fees be increased by 7.5%, 10%, or an alternative figure of its choosing. It was heard that the Council's licensing service was required to be self-financing, but the service was currently running on a deficit, which was one of the reasons for the proposed increase in the fees.

The Committee then discussed the matter. Concerns were raised regarding the taxi licensing service's budget deficit and the extent to which an increase in fees would alleviate this. The Licensing Team Leader explained that there had been a deficit for a number of years; this had been exacerbated by matters such as the obligation to instate new government standards and the need to replace outdated IT systems. Committee members were in agreement about the importance of decreasing the deficit by generating income and finding savings.

In discussing the options of instating either a 7.5% or 10% increase, the Committee sought to understand the rate of increase that would be required to balance the budget. The Licensing Team Leader explained that this was not known as the service's cashflow was irregular so its financial position was regularly fluctuating, but a 10% increase in fees would go some way to addressing the deficit over a number of years – however would not eliminate it. Further advice could be sought from the Council's Finance team if the Committee wished.

Committee members raised queries regarding the projected increase in budget deficit between 2023/24 and 2024/25 as shown in table 1. The Licensing Team Leader clarified that there was currently a vacancy for one member of staff, which when filled, would increase costs. Further explanation was sought regarding the figures in table 1, which were deemed to be unclear. It was also commented that some of the figures in appendix A did not seem to align with the proposed percentage increases and clarity was sought as to how these figures had been calculated. The Licensing Team Leader confirmed that the figures had been checked by the Council's Finance team, but would be checked further prior to being instated.

A Committee member put forward a suggestion that an officer from the Council's Finance team be present at future Licensing Committee meetings at which detailed financial figures were to be discussed.

Other matters raised as part of the discussion included:

- The fees charged by neighbouring local authorities – concerns were raised that some of the proposed fees seemed higher than those charged by other authorities. The Licensing Team Leader highlighted that it was difficult to compare directly as elements of the service that was provided differed across authorities. Some Committee members raised concerns that an increase in fees may cause drivers to instead obtain licenses from those authorities with lower fees. The Committee heard that, over recent years, Crawley had experienced a decline in its number of licensed drivers, but this number was

now increasing. It was noted that there was a national trend of licensed drivers moving toward app-based vehicle and food delivery services, but there was no evidence that a substantial number of drivers had moved from Crawley to other areas.

- The most recent increase to the fees, which was confirmed to be a 5% increase instated earlier in 2023. There was no fee increase in 2022, so this equated to a 2.5% annual increase over the past two years.
- The introduction of a street listing pack, about which a Committee member sought further information. It was heard that this was to be provided due to demand from licensed drivers. A fee would be charged but individuals could opt out of receiving the pack; in which case the fee would not be charged.
- The consultation that would follow the Committee's approval of a fare increase, which the Licensing Team Leader explained would be open for comments from members of the public for 28 days. If objections were received, the matter would be returned to the Committee to enable the representations to be considered before the fees were finalised.
- The budgets of the other services provided by the Council as licensing authority, which the Licensing Team Leader explained were entirely separate to that of the taxi licensing service. Fee increases in those areas could not therefore be used to balance the taxi service's budget.

A Committee member proposed that, as the Committee had requested clarification on some of the projected figures included in the report and appendices, that the consideration of the item be deferred to a future meeting of the Licensing Committee. This would enable officers to collate supplementary information and further clarify the figures with the Council's Finance team, which would assist the Committee in its decision-making. Officers highlighted that, in order to align with the Council's budget-setting timescales, an extraordinary Committee meeting would likely be needed to consider the item.

The proposal was seconded and the Committee moved to a vote on the motion.

RESOLVED

That the Committee agrees to defer the item to a future meeting of the Licensing Committee.

6. Hackney Carriage Fares 2023-2024

The Committee considered report [HCS/065](#) of the Head of Community Services. The Health, Safety and Licensing Team Leader presented the report, which set out a proposal to vary the maximum fares chargeable by licensed hackney carriages. The proposed increases were based on a request put forward by the Crawley Hackney Carriage Association (CHCA).

The Committee then discussed the matter. A Committee member raised concerns that the proposed fare card was complex and may not be easily understood by the travelling public, and that the variance in fares over certain distances or times seemed unintuitive. The Licensing Team Leader acknowledged that the fare card was complex – this was mainly due to the functionality of the meters installed in the vehicles. The fare proposals made by the CHCA had been directly translated into distances and times, hence some of the figures not being round numbers. It was also necessary that there be different tariffs to account for matters such as the time of day of the journey and the number of passengers. The Licensing Team Leader confirmed that work was being done alongside the CHCA to bring about a simplified fare card, but

this was an intricate process that may be open to loopholes if not executed effectively. It was confirmed that a working group was to be set up imminently to continue this work with members of the trade.

A Committee member questioned why the proposed fare card set out travelling distances in yards, rather than in metres. The Licensing Team Leader explained that the taxi meters were programmed to work in yards, but metres could be added to the fare card if the Committee agreed that this amendment should be made.

Upon receipt of a query regarding the raising of the soilage charge to a maximum of £120, the Licensing Team Leader highlighted that the soilage of a vehicle may cause it to be out of use for the entirety of the day, which could cause the driver to lose business. The £120 fee was a maximum; the amount to be charged was at a driver's discretion.

Several Committee members felt that the increase in fares was reasonable and expressed support for the proposals. The Committee then moved to a vote.

RESOLVED

That the Committee:

- a) Approves the table of fares put forward by the Chairman of the Crawley Hackney Carriage Association (on behalf of its members) without amendment, as set out in Appendix B to report HCS/065.
- b) Authorises the Head of Community Services to publish a Public Notice of the variation agreed upon and the period within which objections can be made in accordance with Section 65 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976.

Closure of Meeting

With the business of the Licensing Committee concluded, the Chair declared the meeting closed at 8.39 pm.

I Ashraf (Chair)