

Taxi Provision Working Group

MINUTES OF THE TAXI PROVISION WORKING GROUP MEETING HELD ON 14 MARCH 2022 AT VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS.

Present:

Cllr Allison Bucknell (Chair), Cllr Steve Bucknell, and Cllr Jerry Kunkler

Also Present:

Danial Farr (Compliance Officer), Sarah Marshall (Senior Solicitor), Lisa Pullin (Democratic Services Officer) and Adrian Weissenbruch (SEND & Passenger Assistant Manager)

12 **Apologies**

Apologies were received from Cllr Pip Ridout, and from Adrian Hampton (Head of Highway Operations), Jo Hulbert (Compliance Officer), Tom Ince (Principal Compliance Officer) and Peter White (Enforcement Manager).

13 **Notes from Last Meeting**

The notes of the last meeting held on 13 December 2021 were considered.

Resolved:

That the notes of the Working Group meeting held on 13 December 2021 be approved as a correct record.

14 **Update on Recommendations from Previous Meeting**

The Working Group discussed the updates on the recommendations that had been prepared by Officers:

1. Officers make arrangements to host a driver recruitment day in the Atrium County Hall either in person or online if required by current Covid guidelines that is supported by Licensed Operators, Taxi Licensing and the Passenger Transport Unit as soon as possible.

Jan 2022 Update from Adrian Weissenbruch - Unfortunately the Facilities Management Team are unable to agree to us holding an event of any kind in County Hall or any other Wiltshire building at the moment. However, I am keen we do this as soon as we are given permission to do so as a face to face event is particularly advisable due to the reported limitations of ICT use of our operators and potential candidates. I would like to explore attending other hosted fairs in the meantime.

March 2022 Update from Tom Ince - FM are still not allowing an event to take place in the atrium. A remote event has been avoided as the IT skills of prospective applicants do not lend themselves to this.

The Working Group were disappointed to note that permission had been given to host a sports gala dinner in the atrium but not for a taxi driver recruitment event. The Working Group discussed whether it was still appropriate to hold a recruitment event and agreed that it would be, particularly with the likelihood of further education contracts being required from September 2022. It was hoped that the event could be held in a few months' time and we do all we can to show that Wiltshire is backing the promotion of recruitment in this area.

Danial Farr confirmed that Officers were currently inundated with applications for various licences throughout the county and it would be positive if they all converted to licensed drivers/vehicles.

Adrian Weissenbruch asked if there were any resource issues within the Fleet Licensing Team and he had heard that not all applications were proceeding through the process? Danial Farr reported that he had not noticed Applicants dropping off through process and that they were working through them as quickly as they could. Generally any delays would be caused by awaiting the DBS result which could sometimes take up to 6 weeks. Officers confirmed that Applicants were encouraged to join the DBS update service as it saves them money in the long run and makes it easier for Applicants.

Officers confirmed that no additional Officer resource was required at this time and applications were being processed as soon as possible.

The Working Group asked the following:

Would there be a ceiling of the number of applications that could be processed – if more drivers were recruited would that help with the tendering process for the education transport contracts? Adrian Weissenbruch confirmed that lower tender rates would help them.

Are those drivers that are joining applying to work with established operators or to work on their own? Danial Farr reported that they seemed to be getting a lot of applications for the Salisbury area and that one company seemed to be doing well with recruitment. It was suggested that this company be approached to see if we could duplicate what they are doing with their recruitment for other areas in Wiltshire.

Adrian Weissenbruch confirmed that the Passenger Transport Unit were still in real need of drivers and that it would be preferable to host a recruitment event as soon as possible.

Agreed Action: That Tom Ince and Adrian Weissenbruch work together to seek a date for the taxi driver recruitment event in the atrium at County Hall as soon as possible.

2. **Officers to work with the Council's Communications team to prepare an article to be shared in the local press to call for drivers and outline how easy it is to get licensed.**

Jan 2022 Update from Adrian Weissenbruch - There has been a delay in response from Comms, but they have now got back to me and I had a meeting with Sue Ellison. It was quite positive and she has suggested another approach in the meantime which I think would be equally successful. This would be to create a flyer with a couple of case studies, as well as highlighting the type of contracts available and likely incomes, along with details of the different options and benefits of becoming a Taxi Driver. This would then be sent to very targeted groups that we currently work with, such as people leaving the armed forces, the Police etc. They will be signposted to WC officers that can support them to become taxi drivers along with a list of operators throughout Wiltshire with vacancies and their contact details. I have a follow up meeting whereby we will have this prepared and agree who it will be sent to and how we can then roll it out to the wider Wiltshire population etc.

March 2022 Update from Tom Ince - Adrian Weissenbruch and myself have met with Comms and Donna Mountford is working on a flyer, wording agreed, and a communications plan. Proposed launch date for driver recruitment campaign is 28 March 2022.

The Working Group were informed that Officers had worked with the Communications Team and that a taxi driver recruitment campaign was due to be launched on 28 March 2022 with a leaflet/flyer to be shared out far and wide in locations such as Council owned sites, job centres, libraries and leisure centres. There would also be a digital marketing campaign, display boards in Council sites, flyers on pay and display units for parking and Officers were exploring a temporary stall in high traffic pedestrian areas such as the Shires shopping centre, Emery Gate shopping centre and at Bourne Hill to capture passers by. There would also be a social media campaign.

The Working Group asked if there were particular vacancies for each area – could consideration be given to an event held in Malmesbury or Royal Wootton Bassett?

It was agreed that a copy of the draft flyer and communications plan be shared with the Working Group as soon as possible for their feedback and input before this went to print in the next week or so. Members felt that it needed to be clear that that what the Council was doing was promoting being a taxi driver as a career choice on behalf of other people and that they would not be Council employees. Members requested that the Area Boards be asked to help spread the word about the driver recruitment.

Agreed Action: The draft flyer to launch the driver recruitment campaign be shared with Working Group and feedback be provided to Adrian Weissenbruch as soon as possible to be able to meet the print deadline.

3. **Officers to produce flyers for local businesses such as pubs and supermarkets to call for drivers and outline how easy it is to get licensed and to involve the Area Boards wherever possible.**

March 2022 Update from Adrian Weissenbruch - A major advertising campaign will launch on Monday 28th March. A flyer has been designed by the communications team. This will be heavily distributed. There is intention to advertise on digital displays in leisure centres as well as hard copy displays at pay and display car park machines. Exploring a stand at main shopping centres in Chippenham, Trowbridge and Salisbury. Video will be created for social media campaign. Looking to engage with military for leavers.

See update 2 above which covers the update on this recommendation.

4. **To establish demand Officers to arrange for a survey of:**
 - i) **All licenced premises (pubs and nightclubs) to establish the areas that are seeing demand for taxis not being met, noting specific days and times**
 - ii) **All operators, drivers and vehicle owners to establish where demand is and when**

March 2022 Update from Tom Ince – I will work on the demand survey next week but we believe the real issue is with the Passenger Transport Unit and the school contracts, there have been no complaints from the public regarding the availability of taxis.

Cllr Jerry Kunkler reported that he has trouble getting taxis in the Pewsey and Devizes areas and that those involved with the night-time economy should be consulted as to the demand and it was agreed that it would be good to ascertain if there are issues and concerns about sufficiency.

Cllr Steve Bucknell commented that there was currently really good data on supply but that he felt the demand data was not there and felt that the more patrons etc that could be consulted the better. If there was a demand for other times of the day this could also be sold to the drivers that work on education contracts that there was further work likely to be available in x area at y time.

Agreed Action: That the work on the demand survey be commenced with a wide a range of consultees as soon as possible.

5. **The Passenger Transport Unit to review current and historical statistics and demand to predict trends over next 5 years and liaise with children's services and schools to establish a demand curve over next 5 years.**

Agreed Action: That Adrian Weissenbruch would send his update on this recommendation to the Working Group after the meeting.

6. The Passenger Transport Unit to investigate the use of a walking chaperone service in relevant areas to reduce the number of taxis required for the education transport requirements.

Adrian Weissenbruch reported that they would be able to consider the use of a walking chaperone in relevant areas to reduce the need for a taxi to an education setting. This would be considered and evaluated on a case by case basis and could be set up as a contract with a Passenger Assistant. However, it was likely to be limited in its success as part of the qualifying criteria means that those that live beyond a certain distance would be expected to be walked to school by their parents. This was only likely to be considered perhaps in a case where a parent could not be expected to be in two places where children attend different schools.

The Working Group acknowledged that the feasibility of this was limited but it could be that there were some cases that would be cheaper than the cost of taxi provision and they would be interested on any updates on this if there were any occurrences of this in the future.

Agreed Action: That the Working Group be updated on any instances of a walking chaperone being used as a provision to enable a child/young person to be “transported” to their education setting.

7. Officers to carry out an urgent review of the Vehicle regulations policy (V8 – Current Guidelines updated April 2018) and any restrictions (such as the age of vehicles) which could potentially be considered to be a barrier to people seeking a licence

Tom Ince had prepared a briefing note in response to this request.

Tom Ince confirmed that any vehicle registering to be a taxi has to be no more than 5 years old on the date of first registration. Obviously, there are now older vehicles as part of the Wiltshire fleet and once the vehicle is licenced it can continue to be re-licenced, subject to continuing to meet the conditions of the licence and the checks (MOT?) that are carried out every six months.

The Working Group understood and accepted the views of Officers and agreed that there should not be a change to the Vehicle Regulations Policy at this time.

Further updates for the Working Group

From Adrian Weissenbruch:

- 1. Cornwall have now declared Emergency Status on the lack of Taxi Drivers. Jason Salter (Head of Service – Passenger Transport) will request that Wiltshire Council do the same ahead of an expected crisis in September 2022. The trigger point for this is when we have identified a gap between demand and resource that will mean we cannot meet our statutory**

obligations. We are likely to declare the emergency as predicted growth in the new School year (From September 2022) will outstrip the number of available drivers/taxi's we have. If we don't declare an emergency beforehand, we may face criticism for not saying anything before it has happened and is too late. Cornwall have done it. It is just a gesture but is needed to highlight to our service users and the public that there is a serious issue.

Meeting update – Adrian Weissenbruch reported that they were starting their spring tenders this week – they were a few contracts that they were not able to issue and they would go back out to tender. Pending that outcome in a couple of weeks' time they would know if they needed to declare an emergency status of the lack of taxi drivers.

2. We had about 200 Transport contracts due to expire at Easter this year. We requested an exemption to extend the contracts to provide stability in the market, which was something Passenger Transport felt was right, and something our operators were pleading us for. However, it was refused and we are currently out to Tender for those 200-ish contracts. This will test the market significantly, so the results will be fed back to the group. We predict that costs will go up and/or not all contracts will be fulfilled with drivers/operators walking away from the industry. The Procurement Team believed we would pay extra money out anyway when extending the contracts, as operators may ask for inflation or extra to cover the current high fuel prices, so felt that we should test the market. We will have our results in the next couple of weeks and I will report back the price changes and any issues with covering the contracts and/or possible outfall with the operators.

Meeting update - Adrian Weissenbruch reported that a few of the taxi operators had contacted them to say that many of their contracts were not now financially viable and there was concern that their businesses could go under. This was obviously a high risk for the Council. They had put in requests for 20/30% increases in their contracts and Officers felt that this was extreme and had asked operators to be more realistic as fuel is not the only element of the contract price. Operators had been asked to come back with a more realistic proposal of a percentage increase and Officers were engaging with SWATCO's and looking at that other Local Authorities were doing. During the pandemic the Council continued to pay the contracts at 100% to keep the trade afloat during that time and they obviously would not have incurred the fuel costs during that time – sensible contractors should have squirreled away an element of the funding.

Consideration was being given to pay a temporary uplift on contracts but as the transport spend is circa £22 million per year, every 1% rise amounts to £220,000. Operators were being sent a letter today to inform them that the Council would be applying a 3.75% inflation rise and would also explore a temporary increase to cover the current fuel costs for those operators who were at risk of folding. Officers were playing close attention to the oil markets of middle east production – the cost per barrel had dipped down and that would

hopefully see a knock on to the price of fuel, but that would take around 10 days to take effect and the Council would need to consider holding steady or pay a temporary uplift for a few weeks.

15 **Next Steps**

The following next steps were discussed and agreed by the Working Group:

It was agreed that the two main outstanding recommendations were the setting up of the driver recruitment event and for Officers to issue a demand survey as highlighted above.

It was agreed that a further meeting of the Working Group be set up for early May 2022 and then it was likely that the issues could revert back to the Licensing Committee for regular updates to them.

At the meeting in May the Working Group would like the following:

1. An update on the response to the driver recruitment campaign
2. An update on the fuel prices crisis.

16 **Date and Time of Next Meeting**

Next meeting agreed for Monday 9 May 2022 at 12.15pm via Microsoft Teams.

(Duration of meeting: 11.00 - 11.35 am)

The Officer who has produced these minutes is Lisa Pullin of Democratic Services,
direct line 01225 713015, e-mail committee@wiltshire.gov.uk

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