

Report to Place, Economic Growth and Environment Scrutiny Board

Taxi Licensing Update

Portfolio Holder:

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Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to update Members on the status of the private hire and hackney carriage trade in Oldham.

Recommendation:

Members are asked to:

- Note the report
- Note the changes in policy and the impact this has had on driver/vehicle applicants
- Note the current approach towards engagement with the trade
- Note the challenges that exist in terms of ongoing compliance in the industry
- Provide feedback on the report contents and policy direction

Taxi Licensing Update

1 Background

1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Members on policy changes that have been made and what these have meant in terms of number of licence holders, trade liaison, challenges facing the taxi trade, and its regulatory impact.

2 Licensing Policy

2.1 Oldham Council has had a strong and effective licensing policy for a number of years, one which other authorities refer to as good practice. Officers continue to engage and work closely with our partners within Greater Manchester to ensure consistency in approach and standards.

2.2 With the direction from Government on the need to draft a clean air plan, the Greater Manchester Licensing Authorities decided to not only look at dovetailing licensing policy into the clean air plan, but went further, and commenced a project to create minimum licensing standards across Greater Manchester. This approach led to greater consistency and standardization across the GM region.

2.3 In June 2023, the Licensing Committee approved several changes aimed at reviewing the regulatory burden on the trade whilst ensuring that public safety remained our highest priority. This resulted in the following changes:

- The lower age limit for vehicles coming into the taxi fleet being removed
- Front licence plates being replaced with a window disc
- Operator door signs replaced with licensing issued signs

2.4 The above approach has ensured a strong policy position which works with the trade to make reasonable and pragmatic changes without impacting on public safety and ensures high standards and security.

3 Suitability of applicants and licence holders

3.1 The policy changes resulted in a steady increase of new applicants who were generally Oldham residents but had previously been licensed by other authorities, mainly from Merseyside and the Midlands (9,000 GM residents had registered with on Authority from the Midlands).

3.2 In April 2023, before the above changes were introduced, there were 1,300 drivers licensed by Oldham Council – since the changes, there are now 2,000 licensed drivers with a further 800 applications in the system. Similarly, the number of vehicles registered with Oldham Council has also increased; now at 1,250 from a previous figure of 1,000.

3.3 The significant increases in registered drivers and vehicles has required changes to some of the Authority's processes and for the need to review the staffing resources required to deliver an effective service.

3.4 With the safety of passengers and the wider public being the ‘golden thread’, officers continue to robustly vet applicants and existing licence holders. Oldham Councils fitness and suitability of applicant’s policy ensures that only those who are safe to be licensed drivers are issued a licence and the robust compliance checks ensure that only suitable and safe vehicles are approved.

4 **Trade Liaison**

4.1 Officers and Members continue to meet regularly with trade representatives. There are now two strong and effective private hire associations and a long-established taxi owners association. Through regular meetings, officers are able to understand concerns/issues that are a problem for the trade and provide advice/guidance as appropriate. Where changes to policy and approach can be supported, these are presented to the licensing committee – a good example being the changes introduced in 2023 which have led to an increase in applicants to Oldham and greater local control over the trade.

4.2 Improved dialogue and understanding is proving effective in developing policy and whilst some trade requests cannot always be supported, communication is strong and effective, and the trade associations assist their members with issues that arise from time to time.

5 **Challenges**

5.1 Outdated legislation continues to be a detriment to the industry and regulators alike. With legislation dating back to 1847, in some cases, a revision is desperately needed and although some indications have been given that, where parliamentary time allows, revisions will be made, including national standards, no changes have been laid before parliament for consideration.

5.2 The recently issued ‘Best Practice Guidance from the Department for Transport’ does not go far enough to clarify several points relating to how to regulate the industry. It remains vague in several areas and does not go far enough to ensure consistency and local regulation. Examples include:

- Vehicle age limits
- How to assess the accessibility needs of hackney carriages
- Lack of criteria for additional tests above the MOT standard

5.3 Project work required in relation to private hire and taxi licensing having considered the revised Best Practice Guidance includes:

- Whether we should continue to restrict the number of hackney carriage licences
- Location and maintenance of taxi ranks and roadside infrastructure
- Whether hackney carriages should be mandated to accept payment by card
- Review the frequency of DBS checks with a view to increasing their frequency
- Develop an Inclusive Service Plan to consider duties under the Equality Act
- Work with GM Authorities to develop a plan to move to zero emission vehicles
- Ensure taxi licensing features in our next Local Transport Strategy