
BRECKLAND COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

LICENSING COMMITTEE

**Held on Wednesday, 15 March 2023 at 10.00 am in
The Breckland Conference Centre, Anglia Room, Elizabeth House, Walpole Loke,
Dereham, NR19 1EE**

PRESENT

Cllr Marion Chapman-Allen (Chairman)	Cllr Keith Martin
Cllr Tina Kiddell (Vice- Chairman)	Cllr Linda Monument
Cllr Tristan Ashby	Cllr Philip Morton
Cllr Mike Brindle	Cllr Taila Taylor
Cllr Susan Dowling	

In Attendance

Sarah Wolstenholme-Smy	- Legal Services Manager (Deputy Monitoring Officer)
Sarah Shipley	- Assistant Director Health & Housing
Craig Fowler	- Environmental Health & Licensing Manager
Julie Britton	- Democratic Services Officer

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9/23 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

The Minutes of the meeting held on 11 January 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

Councillor Monument and Councillor Dowling abstained from voting on the Minutes as they had not attended the meeting in January.

10/23 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Bowes and Kiddle-Morris.

11/23 URGENT BUSINESS (AGENDA ITEM 3)

None.

12/23 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS (AGENDA ITEM 4)

None declared.

13/23 NON-MEMBERS WISHING TO ADDRESS THE MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 5)

None in attendance.

14/23 REVIEW OF TAXI LICENCE FEES (AGENDA ITEM 6)

Sarah Shipley, the Assistant Director for Health & Housing presented the report.

As Members were most probably aware, as part of the Council's budget setting process, all fees and charges had been considered, and an inflationary increase of 6.5% had been applied based on advice from The Treasury.

These fees formed part of the budget's Medium Term Financial Plan as approved at the Full Council meeting in February 2023.

At the Licensing Committee meeting on 11 January 2023, Members had been advised by Craig Fowler, the Environmental Health & Licensing Manager, that a consultation on the proposed fee increases would take place with the taxi trade in accordance with the relevant legislation.

The proposed fees had been included at Appendix A of the report. The consultation exercise had now been completed that consisted of a notice in the Eastern Daily Press, a display of the Public Notice at the Council offices and an email that was sent to the trade on 31 January 2023. 14 responses had been received and had been attached at Appendix C of the report.

These responses largely raised concerns about the proposed fare increases, particularly given that the fees had already been increased the previous year.

It was noted that the Portfolio Holder, Councillor Helen Crane, who had the responsibility for Licensing had the power to amend the fees. Members were therefore asked to consider the report together with the consultation responses and determine a recommendation to the Portfolio Holder.

Referring to the advice from the Treasury, Councillor Ashby, asked if the 6.5% increase had formed part of their advice.

Members were informed that this had been a decision taken to apply such an increase to all the Council's discretionary fees due to the Treasury advice received.

Councillor Kiddell asked if other authorities in the district were implementing the 6.5% increase due to the Treasury recommendations.

The Assistant Director for Health & Housing explained that other local authorities in the district reviewed their fees on an annual basis and whether they would be using that figure or not was unknown, and she did not have that information to hand.

Councillor Brindle asked if the increase of 6.5% would mean that the taxi drivers would actually be paying the full rate and not be subsidised.

Members were informed that a detailed exercise was carried out in 2022 in terms of reviewing the fees and charges for the delivery of this service to ensure that the Council was charging enough for cost recovery, but this

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year the 6.5% inflationary increase had been applied rather than undertaking a further exercise.

Councillor Brindle then asked if was reasonable for drivers to accept a further significant increase so soon after the last increase.

Councillor Morton was concerned that in the comments received by the taxi firms they seemed to be at a disadvantage compared to Norfolk County Council.

The Environmental Health & Licensing Manager felt that the context of the comments received was in terms of the pressure the cost increase that this would have on them and being disadvantaged as they would possibly have to pay more to retain the contract work from Norfolk County Council.

Councillor Kiddell said it would be helpful to determine whether Breckland Council was more expensive than other authorities in Norfolk. She asked what this extra 6.5% would provide drivers in terms of service.

Members were informed that the 6.5% was purely an inflationary increase and the service would remain as it was, and as far as other authorities' fees were concerned, she did not know whether Breckland Council was the most expensive.

Councillor Ashby stated that if that particular information was unknown, it would be difficult to form an opinion. He asked if all the income from these fees remained within the Licensing Team.

In response, the Assistant Director for Health & Housing confirmed that such fees did remain within the Team and were only to recover the costs to support the delivery of this service as it was unlawful to make a profit.

Councillor Kiddell said that she had noticed from the responses that drivers were experiencing more and more problems getting through to the Team and felt that it was imperative for drivers that a response should be provided imminently. She had heard of these issues from many drivers that the service being provided was not as good as it used to be, such as losing the ability to check the ranks and the one to ones. This in turn was not helping the drivers to maintain the standard required and with this increase in fees it would be harder for the drivers to reach such standards due to the costs and the Council's staffing issues within the Team and therefore felt that this increase would be unfair.

The Assistant Director for Health & Housing appreciated the concerns being raised but in terms of staffing there had not been any reductions in the Team, and in fact, a new member of staff had been appointed who carried out inspections and checks as all part of the service. In terms of response times, the Environmental Health & Licensing Manager had been working very hard and drivers could contact the Team in many ways either online, by email or by telephone and felt it would be useful to understand where their concerns were.

Councillor Monument also had concerns about the complaints being raised in terms of not being able to get through to the Team. She also raised concerns about the comments received about the Blue Lamp courses in

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respect of safeguarding and having to wait for up to 5 weeks to undertake such a course that usually clashed with the schoolwork that would then cost them a loss in pay. Councillor Monument also asked that if drivers were based in Thetford but had to drop off any paperwork in Dereham which was about an hour and a half round trip, would it not be helpful to have someone from the Team based in Thetford once a month. Also, she asked if this 6.5% increase was really necessary and if there was a possibility that this could be reduced in any way.

The Chairman agreed with the point about having someone based at Thetford on occasion and felt that this should be further investigated.

Councillor Dowling reiterated what Councillor Monument had said, she understood how the taxi drivers felt about the lack of response and believed that this needed to be looked at as soon as possible.

The Chairman said that she would be asking the Officers to investigate these delays.

Councillor Ashby also echoed the previous comments and felt that Members did not have enough information to make an informed decision and was not comfortable with the 6.5% increase. He asked if there was any difference in service with remote working compared to pre Covid.

Members were informed that there was no difference in service, the Team provided a good service but the issues raised would be looked at. The Assistant Director for Health & Housing felt that the Thetford point would be considered as this could be introduced quite quickly.

Councillor Kiddell did not believe that the service was as good as it used to be due to the many complaints that she received being a driver herself. She also echoed the comments made about the Blue Lamp courses as she felt that this was an overkill if drivers already completed 2 online safeguarding courses with Norfolk County Council. She was aware that proprietors were finding it extremely difficult to recruit drivers due to the initial outlay of around £1,000 and this proposed 6.5% increase would have a negative impact on the trade and would be voting against the increase. She felt that the Portfolio Holder should go back to Cabinet and lower the fees to an acceptable figure or not increase it at all.

Councillor Brindle agreed with the aforementioned comments and felt it would be better if it could be demonstrated that there had been some movement towards the taxi drivers' point of view.

The Chairman had been pleased with the feedback from Members. She said it was important to keep her and Officers informed of what was going on and if any further issues were raised by the drivers, she asked Members to contact her so that they could be raised with the Team rather than wait until another meeting so that such matters could be resolved beforehand.

The Environmental Health & Licensing Manager advised that this Council wanted to offer the best possible service and according to the performance indicators there had not been a drop-in service in terms of response times.

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Councillor Monument stated that the Blue Lamp course appeared to be unpopular and was clearly not quick enough and therefore the Norfolk County Council course or other courses should be considered and by doing this the drivers would know that Members were actually listening.

It was noted that the Blue Lamp comments would be taken on board.

In the Team's defence, the Chairman pointed out that various courses were looked at pre-Covid, but the Blue Lamp course was chosen as Norfolk County Councils courses were not available at the time.

Taking all the above comments into account, the Chairman felt that Members did not have enough information to make an informed decision and proposed that this report be deferred until the next meeting to allow further information to be included.

Councillor Kiddell seconded the above proposal.

Following a vote, it was

RESOLVED that the decision to make recommendations to the Portfolio Holder on the proposed increase be deferred until the next meeting and further information be included in the report.

Councillor Monument asked when the increased fees would come into effect if agreed at the next meeting.

Councillor Ashby asked if the fees would have to be backdated to April.

The Assistant Director for Health & Housing advised that the Council decision had been made to increase the fees; therefore, legal advice would have to be sought on whether they should be backdated if approved.

15/23 NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The arrangements for the next meeting on Wednesday, 14 June 2023 at 10am in the Anglia Room were noted.

The meeting closed at 10.35 am

CHAIRMAN