

Notes of the informal meeting between the General Licensing Committees of South Oxfordshire District Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council – 4 October 2012

In attendance:

South Oxfordshire District Councillors: Joan Bland, Pat Dawe, Elizabeth Gillespie, Malcolm Leonard, Pearl Slatter, Margaret Turner, and Mike Welply,
Substitute: Councillor David Turner for Councillor Anne Purse

Vale of White Horse District Councillors: Melinda Tilley (Chairman of this informal joint meeting), John Amys, Marilyn Badcock, Mike Badcock, Charlotte Dickson, Anthony Hayward, Dudley Hoddinott, Bob Johnston, Ron Mansfield, Julie Mayhew-Archer, and Gill Morgan.

Officers: Steve Culliford, Robert Draper, Liz Hayden, and Margaret Reed

10 members of the public

Joint licensing policy for hackney carriage and private hire

Councillors from the General Licensing Committees of South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council met informally to discuss the draft policy for hackney carriage and private hire. Councillor Melinda Tilley, chairman of the Vale's committee, chaired the meeting.

Councillors noted that there had been 114 consultation responses to draft policy. These had been analysed and an options paper prepared for councillors to debate the policy elements. In answer to questions from councillors, the officers reported that they had informed all consultation respondents of the date, time, and venue of this meeting by email on 27 September.

Councillors considered the options paper, set out in appendix 2 to the committee report. This set out in detail the issues raised in the consultation and made a recommendation on each issue. Councillors supported almost all of the recommendations bar one, that relating to the proposal to introduce a maximum tariff for hackney carriages in South Oxfordshire and retain the tariff system in the Vale. Officers explained that they wanted to introduce a tariff across both districts for public safety reasons. They gave an example of the public disorder problems that occurred at Henley Regatta when the public were trying to hire taxi cabs. This would be overcome by introducing a tariff system that set a maximum fee proprietors could charge. In the Vale, the tariff was displayed in every taxi and was checked when the vehicles were tested.

Over 360 councils across the country operated a hackney carriage tariff scheme. The Vale's existing scheme had a basic two-rate structure (one tariff for daytime, another for the night) but the tariff was in need of review to give more flexibility. Any changes to the tariff would have to be advertised by law and consultation responses sought from the public and the taxi trade. Changes to the tariff would be a cabinet decision, not a decision for the General Licensing Committee. Despite consulting on whether to review the tariff, there had been no changes for four years, even though there had been significant increases in fuel costs. The trade had not called for a review of the tariff during that period.

Some councillors queried the need for a maximum tariff in South Oxfordshire. In answer to a question from a councillor, the officer reported that he had no evidence that a price-fixing cartel existed in the district. Some councillors suggested the council should adopt a scheme similar to the one suggested by Mr Pryor, with proprietors setting their own tariff. However, the officers expressed caution, believing that this would be difficult for the council to manage and enforce, and would result in the need for additional resources. There were over 400 hackney carriages registered in South Oxfordshire.

Some councillors were uneasy about setting a tariff for hackney carriages in South Oxfordshire, believing it would curb free enterprise and would cost the council to administer the scheme.

Vale councillors generally believed that the tariff should be retained in their district but it should be restructured to make it more flexible. However, they did not rule out the possibility of the council removing the tariff in the longer term.

After a short adjournment, the informal joint meeting continued. Councillors continued to review the other policy options. Councillors agreed with the remaining recommendations but asked that the spoken English test was introduced as soon as possible, preferably as early as January 2013.

Councillors from the two councils agreed that there was only one area where opinions differed, that relating to hackney carriage tariffs. Councillors agreed to the remaining policy recommendations set out in the options paper.

Councillor Melinda Tilley then closed the informal meeting.