

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of Licensing and Community Safety Committee held in the Barum Room - Brynsworthy on Tuesday, 10th December, 2024 at 10.30 am

PRESENT: Members:

Councillor York (Chair)

Councillors Cann, Haworth-Booth, Hunt, Jusef, Lethaby, Norman, Quinn, Whitehead and Williams

Officers:

Legal Advisor, (HP) Lead Officer Commercial Regulation, (KN) and Licensing Officer (PF)

23. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Biederman, Denton, Milton, and Maskell.

24. TO APPROVE AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 10 SEPTEMBER 2024

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 10 September 2024 (circulated previously) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

25. ITEMS BROUGHT FORWARD WHICH IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR SHOULD BE CONSIDERED BY THE MEETING AS A MATTER OF URGENCY

There were no items, which in the opinion of the Chair, should be considered as a matter of urgency.

26. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest announced.

27. VERSO LICENSING SOFTWARE UPDATE

The Committee received an update on VERSO, the new Licensing software,

The Business Information Systems Manager gave the following update:

- The team had been working hard to bring in the new software, which would replace Lalpac.
- The new software would reduce officer time, as all applications would be made online.

- The search for replacement software had begun three years ago, demonstrations and conversations with reference sites had been undertaken before the final solution was decided upon.
- All licensing forms would now be available online as well as the ability to pay at point of application.
- Applicants would be able to create a user portal and the system would also be able to email reminders to applicants when documents were due for renewal.
- Taxi Driver applications would be the first to go live on the system early 2025.
- The trade newsletter would advise all drivers of the new system for applying for and renewing licences.
- The system would automatically delete incomplete applications after reminders had been issued.

In response to questions, the Business Information Systems Manager gave the following replies:

- The portal was not available to the general public only those applying for licences so it was expected that their level of English language was such that they could understand the online process.
- Help would always be available to anyone who was unable to use the online application process at one of the community offices.

The Lead Officer Commercial Regulation added that there was an expectation that hackney carriage and private hire driver's had a good level of English to converse with passengers and this was required for them to be 'fit and proper' persons. All Driver's had to give an email address to be contacted on. Other licensed areas such as Licensing Act, Gambling and scrap metal the expectation of a certain level of English was not the same and extra allowances/translations would be made available where necessary.

The Business Information Systems Manager went on to advise that:

- There would be short videos available for each section of a form that was being completed.
- The form did comply with the WCAG and accessibility requirements.
- Another Authority had recently gone live with the software and had reported that the service had been very well received by the users, in particular the Driver's liked the portal and having 24/7 access to their account.
- As well as the Licensing officers being trained, the customer service team had tested the online form and feedback had been positive.
- The form can be saved and revisited if needed before submission.
- The company Rock Time were a British company based in Poole, Dorset.
- We were the first Authority in Devon to move to using VERSO but were confident the best solution available on the market had been chosen.

28. COMMUNITY SAFETY UPDATES

The Committee received an update on the work of the Community Safety Partnership.

The Community Safety Officer gave updates in the areas of Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery, counter terrorism, and the night bus as follows:

- Modern slavery and human trafficking was defined as the recruitment and/or movement of human beings exploited by threats to carry out activities.
- An incident locally relating to a modern day slavery issue had highlighted that locally we might not be in a position to know how to respond to an incident. Measures were now in place so we could react and deal with reports of modern slavery and or human trafficking.
- Internationally and nationally this issue was becoming more common so more likely it would affect the North Devon area again.
- There was a strong potential for people to be exploited in North Devon due to tourism and seasonal type work available.
- The increasing number of displaced people this could cause more issues in the future.
- The issue was tackled by a multi-agency approach and the Community Safety Partnership was used to this type of working.
- Mid-October a meeting was held with Salvation Army, Sunrise Diversity North Devon, Torrington District Council to fact find on the issue of modern slavery locally.
- There was a national referral mechanism designed to help those found to be the victim of modern slavery.
- As a District Council, if we came across victims of modern slavery we had to refer them to the national mechanism.
- Referral to the national mechanism did not give an instant response so we would need to monitor the situation to help.
- Consent had to be given by the victim so if not given no referral could be made.
- We need to be more proactive in finding cases and as a result, officer training would be required.

In response to questions, the Community Safety Officer gave the following responses:

- Often victims of this type of crime were too afraid to report the issue and English not being their first language often created a barrier too.
- If there were suspicions of this type of activity taking place the first point of contact was with the Police.
- Details of the concerns could be passed to the Community Safety Officer but ideally, the person who had suspicions should be the one to report it to the Police.

The Community Safety Officer resumed his update:

- The counter terrorism local profile was a measure set up by the counterterrorism Police.
- A set of recommendations came as part of this information and as ever there was training available open to members to undertake to refresh understanding of the issue.
- The night bus service was resuming

Councillor Norman reminded members that there was a training plan for members being put together by Member Services and to let them know of any requirements for training.

The Chair asked the Community Safety Officer to bring back an update on the cut to bus services, as the Committee were keen to support the reinstatement of services by making representations to Stagecoach.

The Anti-Social Behaviour Officer gave an update as follows:

- There had been a significant increase in numbers of drinking alcohol in public issues in Ilfracombe over the summer months.
- The street marshals were only contracted to cover the town for two days a week but were helpful to reduce incidents.
- Action was being taken to reduce street and beach drinking by means of Criminal Penalty Notices, the breaching of which was a criminal offence and cases were taken to court.
- Appreciated taking alcoholics to court to fine for breach of order was not the answer but a useful tool.
- Engagement with individuals to solve problems causing the behaviour had been very challenging and not possible in many of the cases.
- The Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO) had been extended to cover more beach areas in Ilfracombe.

The Anti-Social Behaviour Officer gave the following responses to questions:

- The extension of the street marshals in the town was under discussion. It had proven to be effective in Barnstaple.
- Incidents in Ilfracombe was quite different to the issues in Barnstaple in that many of the individuals were not homeless.
- Support services available in Ilfracombe could be found at Belle's Place.
- Whilst the street marshals were useful, they did not have the same powers as the Police. After discussion with the Inspector in Ilfracombe extra resources were being deployed to the area.
- In terms of personal safety, body-worn cameras were worn and staff never attended incidents alone.
- The street marshals were not removing bedding left out to dry on walls by homeless people, in the winter months, but could be removed during warmer months.
- All incidents of anti-social behaviour should be logged with the Police.

29. CHANGE OF ORDER OF ITEMS ON THE AGENDA

RESOLVED that as external officers from Devon County Council had travelled to attend the meeting the item of Hackney Carriage Rank Review would be considered ahead of Lack of Provision of Accessible Hackney Carriage and Private Hire vehicles in Barnstaple.

30. HACKNEY CARRIAGE RANK REVIEW

The Committee considered a report by the Lead Officer Commercial Regulation (circulated previously) regarding Hackney Carriage Rank Review.

The Lead Officer Commercial Regulation highlighted the following:

- Colleagues from Devon County Council were in attendance to answer any questions in relation to the review of the taxi ranks.
- Responses to an informal consultation with the trade could be seen at Appendix A of the report.
- Section 4.7 of the report, summarised the comments received from the taxi trade in relation to the proposed amendments to taxi ranks in North Devon.
- The comments fell into the following categories:
 - Full support for the taxi rank locations being amended as proposed in Ilfracombe.
 - Proposals to amend the timings of the Barton Road, Woolacombe rank from 10pm-6am to 6pm-6am in line with purported delivery times in this location.
 - Concern over the rank on the Esplanade, Woolacombe due to its proximity to its junction and the make-up of the kerb being alleged to be an uneven grazed surface.
 - Proposal to amend the rank from the Esplanade, Woolacombe to the road adjacent to The Red Barn, Barton Road, Woolacombe (opposite bus stop), being a one way road of greater width; and
 - Concerns over lack of enforcement with ranks being parked on by private vehicles (largely outside of scope of this review as powers to enforce were held by Devon County Council).

James Bench from Devon County Council addressed the committee regarding the enforcement process. As a result of ranks being formalised as no stopping taxi ranks, this would mean no vehicles could stop on a designated taxi rank and if they did enforcement would be a simpler process.

The Lead Officer Commercial Regulation presented some photographs of the rank currently in use at the Esplanade, Woolacombe along with a photo of the location of a proposed new rank in Barton Road, Woolacombe.

The Chair advised the Committee that the Ward Member for Woolacombe, Councillor Wilkinson, had recently taken the item of taxi rank review to the Parish Council meeting where it was agreed in favour of a new rank outside The Red Barn.

The Devon County Council Officer confirmed that the creation of a new rank outside of the Red Barn to accommodate four bays would be possible after undertaking further consultation. The width of the road was sufficient to take the creation of a rank.

The Licensing Officer advised that a rank outside the Red Barn had historically been rescinded as the Fire Service had made representations regarding access. It was believed that the width of the road was sufficient and in the event of vehicles needing to be moved, taxis were rarely left unattended so could easily be asked to move to allow access by emergency vehicles.

The Lead Officer Commercial Regulation went on to explain the process to bring about formalising the proposed taxi rank at Barton Road, informal consultation/notice of the proposal would be sent out to the trade seeking their observations and comments. Once all comments had been collated, it would return to Strategy and Resources Committee. If agreed at Committee a notice in the local newspaper would be published to be able to formally adopt as a Hackney Carriage rank.

In the absence of Councillor Maskell, the Lead Officer Commercial Regulation read out an email from her. This was highlighting an error in the drawing of Exeter Road, Braunton, as seen on page 31 of the agenda (drawing number ENV5910/11 (C)). Councillor Maskell believed the Existing Bus Stop Clearway (dark blue dots) and the Existing Limited Waiting (light blue dots) were the wrong way round. The Devon County Council Officer present confirmed this was a typographical error and would be corrected.

Members went on to discuss other areas in Barnstaple and query their proposed amendments. A single line would be inserted in Cross Street once the rank had been removed, this would allow parking after 6pm in line with the rest of the street.

In clarification the rank in Mid-Boutport was to retain its Existing No Waiting At Any Time Except Taxis status.

In response to a question about how many Disabled Bays there were in Mid-Boutport Street. The Devon County Council Officer displayed the County Council mapping tool showing the Disabled Bays along Boutport Street.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That consideration was given to the responses, as seen at Appendix A of the report, given to the consultation on the proposed taxi rank amendments, shown on the maps at Appendix B and listed at Appendix C of the report;
- (b) To consult with the taxi trade on the proposed options for the Woolacombe rank:
 - (i) Consolidate ranks and just have one new rank outside the Red Barn;
 - (ii) Keep the two existing ranks at the Esplanade and Barton Road and create a new rank outside the Red Barn; or
 - (iii) Keep the rank at the Esplanade and create a new one outside the Red Barn, removing the existing one at Barton Road; and
- (c) To recommend to Strategy and Resources Committee recommendations once informal consultation with the trade has taken place with regard further advertising of the proposals for amendment of the Hackney Carriage ranks in line with Section 63 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976.

31. LACK OF PROVISION OF ACCESSIBLE HACKNEY CARRIAGE AND PRIVATE HIRE VEHICLES IN BARNSTAPLE

The Committee received an update on the lack of provision of accessible Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Vehicles operating in Barnstaple.

The Lead Officer Commercial Regulation updated the Committee with the following:

- As a result of recently received correspondence from concerned members of the public around lack of provision of accessible taxi vehicles it was decided to highlight the issue with the Committee.
- A further report would come back to Committee but a discussion around the Authorities obligations regarding provision was needed to help form a way forward.
- The Department for Transport had issued a best practice guidance on taxi and private hire vehicle licensing for Local Authorities to assist in the regulation of the sector.
- In terms of accessibility many users face barriers such as not having access to a vehicle large enough to take a wheelchair, uneven surfaces, inability to stand for any length of time, lack of provision of vehicles.
- The Local Authority had an obligation to seek to ways to mitigate those issues.
- North Devon Council had adopted in its policy the requirement for larger, wheelchair accessible vehicles, to not have to be at the Euro 6 standard but alternatively Euro 5 for diesel or Euro 4 for petrol vehicles.
- This incentive had not seen any increase in the number of wheelchair accessible vehicles registered in the trade.
- In comparison with other Local Authorities in Devon, it was discovered we were not alone in struggling to incentivise more drivers to purchase wheelchair accessible and or larger vehicles.

Members discussed issues they were aware of due to the lack of provision of wheelchair accessible vehicles in the area.

The Chair highlighted organisations that offered community transport and the suggestion on whether they could help out.

Councillor Lethaby advised he was aware of funding Combe Martin had applied for in regard of making accessibility adaptations to community transport and would forward the information.

RESOLVED that the situation be noted.

32. FUTURE MEETING DATES OF THE LICENSING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY COMMITTEE

The committee considered the proposed the future dates of the Licensing and Community Safety Committee.

Licensing and Community Safety Committee - 10 December 2024

RECOMMENDED to council that the proposed future dates of the Licensing and Community Safety Committee, as detailed at agenda item 10, be approved.

Chair

The meeting ended at 1.00 pm

NOTE: These minutes will be confirmed as a correct record at the next meeting of the Committee.