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## Licensing Committee

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**MINUTES** of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, ME10 3HT on Tuesday, 11 February 2025 from 7.00 pm - 7.55 pm.

**PRESENT:** Councillors Derek Carnell (Chair), Alex Eyre, Carole Jackson, Ben J Martin, Lee-Anne Moore, Tara Noe, Tom Nundy, Paul Stephen, Terry Thompson (Substitute for Councillor Rich Lehmann) and Tony Winckless (Vice-Chair).

**PRESENT (VIRTUALLY):** Councillor Simon Clark.

**OFFICERS PRESENT:** Steph Curtis, Kellie MacKenzie, Jo Thomas and Helen Ward.

**APOLOGIES:** Councillors Roger Clark and Rich Lehmann.

641 **Emergency Evacuation Procedure**

The Chair outlined the emergency evacuation procedure.

642 **Minutes**

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 24 June 2024 (Minute Nos. 61 – 66) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

The Minutes of the Licensing Sub-Committees held on 27 November 2024 (Minute Nos. 390 – 394) and 18 December 2024 (Minute Nos. 518 – 522) were accepted by the Chair as a correct record.

643 **Declarations of Interest**

No interests were declared.

644 **Public Session**

No members of the public had registered to speak.

645 **Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy 2025 - 2030**

The Licensing Team Leader introduced the report which presented a draft of the revised Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy, set out at Appendix I of the report, and advised on the proposed consultation methodology to be used. She drew attention to the proposed changes, set out at Appendix II. The Department of Transport (DfT) Best Practice Guidance 2023 and the implications for Swale Borough Council (SBC), were set out at Appendix III.

The Licensing Team Leader referred to the items for discussion: Disability Awareness for Drivers; Topographical Tests for Private Hire Driver applicants; vehicle ages; environmental considerations; and Hackney Carriage (Taxi) Fares – Soilage Charge, as set out in the report.

The Chair invited questions from Members, and points raised included:

- How in-depth was the topographical test?;
- not sure that the tests were needed, given that most vehicles had satellite navigation fitted;
- the electric vehicles (EVs) were expensive and there were few EV charging points on the eastern end of the Isle of Sheppey;
- considered that the deadline for Ultra Low Emission Vehicles (ULEV) by 1 April 2027 was unfair and unachievable;
- concerned regarding the school run only licence, unless each vehicle and licence was clearly visible as such with a fixed sign on the vehicle;
- there had been a lot of issues since the topographical test was amended, aware that some taxi drivers had registered with companies outside the borough to avoid the topographical test;
- considered that more work was required on the policy prior to going out to public consultation;
- aware that some car manufacturers were offering deals on EVs;
- drivers needed to be educated on the benefits of EVs, and make more of an effort to purchase them;
- would not want to see the topographical test removed, as customers wanted to know that when they entered a hackney carriage vehicle the driver would use the shortest route;
- there were not enough rapid EV charging units available;
- the ULEV deadline should be extended to 2035;
- EVs were the way forward and it was important that the Council ensured enough EV charging points were available;
- the topographical test should remain as it was important, particularly for vulnerable customers, that drivers were 'fit for purpose';
- the soilage charge should be increased to £100 in order to safeguard drivers; and
- welcomed the consultation which would inform officers on any changes needed to the Policy.

In response, the Licensing Team Leader explained that the topographical test was in two sections, the first section involved questions on 'places within the borough', and the other section asked the applicants to pick the shortest route to a destination, both sections provided multiple choice answers. The Licensing Team Leader explained that applicants needed to achieve high scores to pass the test, and officers considered there were safety risks in removing the test, and also it might result in a reduction in Hackney Carriage Licenced Drivers. She said that responses to the consultation would inform any potential amendments to the draft policy and also provide a steer as to whether the ULEV deadline needed to be extended.

With regard to the restrictive private hire licence, the Licensing Team Leader reported that both Medway Council and Gravesham Council had operated the scheme successfully. She confirmed that the restrictive private hire driver would have to use a restrictive hire vehicle and not be able to operate a 'normal' hire vehicle. The plates on the vehicle would be in green and linked to the drivers' badges so it was also clear to the public.

Councillor Tom Nundy proposed the following amendment: That the Hackney Carriage (Taxi) Fares – Soilage Charge be increased from £50 to £100. This was seconded by Councillor Lee-Anne Moore. On being put to the vote the amendment was agreed by Members.

Councillor Ben J Martin proposed the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Tony Winckless.

**Resolved:**

- (1) That the soilage charge be increased from £50 to £100.**
- (2) That the consultation process as outlined be noted and officers be instructed to proceed with the same.**
- (3) That the increase in the soilage charge, as amended, be added to the new tariff, which would be consulted upon in accordance with the statutory requirements later this month.**

646 **Annual Licensing Update Report**

The Licensing Team Leader introduced the report which informed Members on the activities and performance of the licensing team during 2024, and showed aims and targets for the forthcoming year.

A Member queried why so many applicants had failed the Street Knowledge Test. The Licensing Team Leader considered this was due to some drivers not being suitably prepared prior to taking the test. In response to a question from a Member, she agreed to consider whether a mock test could be provided, and warned they had to be careful not to compromise the integrity of the test.

A Member welcomed the excellent report and praised the Licensing Team on their good work.

Councillor Lee-Anne Moore proposed the recommendation, which was seconded by Councillor Tom Nundy.

**Resolved:**

- (1) That the report be noted.**

Chair

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All minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel