

ACCESS TO COUNCIL SERVICES~~TAXI~~ SCRUTINY PANEL

MEETING 21 AUGUST~~22 FEBRUARY~~ 2006

Present: Councillors Mrs. Byrne (as substitute for Connell), Hayes, A. Connell, Hamilton, Hussain, Peel, and Mrs. Ronson~~Ibrahim, Mrs Rothwell, and Shaw.~~

Officers:

Steve Arnfield – Director, Corporate Resources

James Dearling ~~— Senior Democratic Services Officer~~

Andrew Fisher – Group Manager (Licensing and Pest Control), Environmental Services

Roy Fox – Special Projects Manager, Environmental Services

Robert Landon – Head of Democratic Services

David Smith – Policy Accountant, Commercial Services

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors P. Brierley and Connell.

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

Resolved – That Councillor Hussain be appointed Chair.

23. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST~~APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR~~

Resolved – that Councillor Hussain be appointed cChairman.

4. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

There were no Declarations of Interest.

The minutes of the previous meeting, held on 26 January 2006, were submitted and agreed as a correct record.

5. THE SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

The Panel considered the results of the scoping exercise undertaken at the previous meeting.

During the ensuing discussion of the item, the proposed scope and duration of the Panel's investigations were reconsidered. It was suggested that a thorough investigation was preferable to one that might pursue an over ambitious timetable, this would mean extending the length of the review from the previously agreed three months.

~~The usefulness of gathering witness testimony from all three taxi associations (Bolton Hackney Association, Bolton Taxi Drivers' Association, and the Private Hire Association) was agreed. Similarly, the value of obtaining evidence from private-sector garages and from a senior vehicle tester at Wellington yard was expressed.~~

~~Resolved —~~

- ~~(i) That the report be noted;~~
- ~~(ii) and That representatives from the three taxi associations be invited to a witness session on 8 March.~~
- ~~(iii) That it be agreed that a review of longer than three months is required in order to undertake a thorough review~~

~~6. REVIEW OF THE ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE TESTING OF TAXIS AND PRIVATE HIRE VEHICLES~~

~~A report was submitted to the Panel, addressing those matters relating to the testing and licensing of taxis which were identified by the Panel at its meeting on 26 January.~~

~~Following consideration of the report, a number of points were made and clarifications given:~~

~~primary comparisons were made with other AGMA authorities, due chiefly to time constraints;~~

~~the need to investigate local authorities which out-sourced their taxi licensing to the private sector/external supplier was underlined by panel members;~~

~~the need for a provider to have sufficient capacity to be able to satisfy the peaks in demand for taxi testing, particularly given the growing size of the private hire fleet;~~

~~if the contract for taxi testing was put out to tender, a mechanism to monitor the performance of any provider against contract specification would need to be developed and introduced;~~

~~the value of including any 'mystery shopper' methods in performance monitoring was questioned by Panel members;~~

~~the legal requirement for taxi testing is once a year, though it would be beneficial to know the frequencies imposed by other AGMA authorities;~~

~~the likelihood is that in the future the duration of the current forty-five minute test will increase with additional test requirements, possibly up to an hour and 15 minutes;~~

~~the setting of an age limit beyond which a local authority would not license vehicles may be arbitrary and disproportionate — however, a no age limit policy may encourage use of vehicles with exhaust emission levels and safety standards for both passengers and pedestrians that are not in touch with the benefits that result~~

~~from ongoing improvements in vehicle design;~~

~~the council's responses to a Department for Transport (DfT) consultation on Taxi and Private Hire Vehicles was considered, and the Panel informed that the final guidance from the DfT had not yet been produced;~~

~~the current price charged for testing does not recover the cost to the council of the test — i.e., there is not a business case for Environmental Services to continue to do the work at the current rate — and the absence of a council decision to subsidise taxi testing was highlighted; and~~

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- ~~• direct comparisons between AGMA authorities for the 6 monthly testing of vehicles are problematic, but Bolton would appear to be in the mid range of fees charged.~~

~~Resolved — that~~ **3. SCOPING THE REVIEW**

The Panel considered a scoping document to identify the purpose of the review, its timetable, and information and witnesses required. During the discussion a number of points were made:

- the review would address access to council buildings for members of the public, and not be concerned with access to council buildings as a place of work;
- the results of a survey of the council's buildings were currently being collated and could be provided at the Panel's next meeting;
- the value of including the offices and community buildings of Bolton at Home in the Panel's review was expressed by Panel members;
- alternative arrangements requiring the use of Information Technology could prove problematic to those members of the public not computer literate and such arrangements perhaps warranted investigation by the Panel;
- it was felt that language constraints might affect the accessibility of council services to members of the public;
- whilst expressing a desire to adhere to the definition of disability given in the Disability Discrimination Act, the Panel members recognised that to include all forms of disability in the review was impractical; and
- a listing of all access arrangements that the council's Contact Centre and One Stop Shop have in place could be provided to the Panel's next meeting.

With further regard to the background information required by the Panel, Panel members expressed a need for the information specified in the Scoping Document (i.e., knowledge of the Council's current position regarding meeting the access to building requirements of the DDA, together with the arrangements to improve the

Council's compliance with the Act. In particular, knowledge of how priorities are set in undertaking DDA works, the cost, and the timetables to make Council buildings compliant with the Act. Also, information on the current legislative framework and the guidance on how to implement disability equality within local authority service provision, the Council's policies/strategies relating to accessibility and customer access, and any relevant Performance Indicators.)

Regarding the witnesses required for the review, Panel members indicated the value of inviting representatives from disability groups, the Disability Officer from Bolton at Home, and members of the Disability Steering Group.

With regard to the timescale of the review, the Panel agreed the next meeting would be in mid-September.

Resolved –

- (i) That the Panel note the Scoping Document;
- (ii) That for the next meeting of the Panel a background information report be prepared which included the requirements of the DDA, the survey of the council's buildings, cost implications, and Access Bolton arrangements; and
- (iii) That the next meeting of the Panel be arranged for 10.30am on 19 September 2006.

~~for the next meeting of the Panel a report be prepared investigating local authorities which out-sourced their taxi licensing to the private sector/external supplier(s).~~

~~7. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS~~

~~Resolved – That, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted of the nature of the proceedings, it is likely that if members of the press and public were present during the following items of business there would be disclosure to them of exempt information as defined in paragraph 7 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 and that, in pursuance of Section 100A(4) of such Act, members of the press and public be now excluded from the meeting.~~

~~78. FINANCIAL ASPECTS RELATING TO PRIVATE SECTOR GARAGES~~

~~A report was submitted to the Panel which contained a comparison with private sector garage costs and details of any prior investigation of the possible outsourcing of the taxi testing service to recognised garages.~~