

Taxi Forum Meeting Notes

30 October 2024

Civic Centre, Addlestone at 11am

The forum was attended by 10 drivers, one retired driver and two representatives from South Western Railways (SWR), Andrew Bryant (AB) and Louise Harley (LH) who were welcomed to the forum by Mrs Kelly Dufield (KD), the Senior Licensing Officer. Mrs Jill Tyne (JT), Mrs Nicola Clarke and Miss Clare Pinnock (taking notes) also in attendance.

1. Railway Stations – hire of hackney carriage ranks

Drivers were reminded that SWR would take back the control, supervision and contract arrangements for the station ranks from 1 January 2025 onwards.

RBC charges drivers in arrears, so will recoup the final costs through HC fees in 2025 – 2026. The Council would no longer be providing ANPR details for HC drivers for Egham Station from January 2025. AB explained that RBC licensed drivers would need to apply for a permit direct from SWR via a website link to be provided towards the beginning of December 2024. The cost for Egham would be £200 per annum or £55 if paying quarterly. For the first 6 months the other stations in the borough including Chertsey there will be no charge until July 2025, with 2 months' notice being given. There was an option to take a quarter off if it fitted with the quarters and together. The option for automated renewal quarterly could be looked at. There was no extra charge for using a replacement vehicle provided SWR were advised ASAP (latest on the day) to avoid being ticketed.

The fee was substantially less than neighbouring boroughs where schemes were already in place. The fees would be reviewed annually. Depending on demand there could be an option to have a combined Egham and Chertsey permit, but there were currently no plans for ANPR at Chertsey or Addlestone, and the future of the Addlestone rank would be determined following a further review. Feedback was that the Addlestone rank spaces were misused and not wanted by the trade, but they would like more ranks at Egham and Chertsey. The ranks at Egham were discussed and in the context of the upcoming building works with adjacent residential units. SWR had been consulted by the developer and assured that the development should not affect the number of available ranks, and plans indicated there would be more disabled spaces. The timescale for completion was not known at this stage. It was confirmed that the 20 minutes waiting time being reduced was not an option but AB keen to work with the trade to see what other improvements could be possible, such as signage and more targeted enforcement patrols (currently once per week). In terms of enforcement, it was useful to have photographic evidence, but a PCN couldn't be issued just on the receipt of a photo, but could be used as intelligence. A particular issue at Chertsey would be discussed separately.

KD confirmed that from 2026/27 there would be a reduction in the RBC vehicle licensing fees to reflect the removal of the contract with SWR.

Action points and SWR responses dated 01/11/24

AB to raise with on-site staff access to the public toilet at Egham Station and look at more targeted enforcement patrolling both at Egham and Chertsey

We are raising this with the station manager today and will come back to you with an update.

AB to meet a number of interested drivers on site to discuss layout of the new ranks, re-painting the taxi markings, new signage and enforcement. Date in December TBC and communicated to the trade with a RSVP

KD to provide contact details for AB to the drivers

Drivers should use the email address register.anpr@swrailway.com with any queries

AB to provide KD with the website link to apply for permits to pass onto the trade

We will share this once everything has been set-up for 2025 – this should be during the first week of December

AB to confirm how many PCNs had been issued

Number issued this financial year (since April 2024) are:

Addlestone: 5

Chertsey: 20

Egham: 277

2. Fees for 2025 – 2026

It was noted that the annual fee review had been carried out and the proposals would be scrutinised by the Regulatory Committee on 6 November before final approval.

Licence fees would increase on a cost recovery basis in line with the legislation which permits Councils to recover the costs of issue, administration and additionally, in the case of drivers, compliance.

- Vehicles: 7 – 10% increase
- Drivers: 16 – 17% increase
- Private Hire Operators: 14 – 16% increase

The Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) was planning to increase the cost of DBS checks and the DBS Update Service from 2nd December 2024 (subject to ministerial approval). The individual fee changes would be finalised once the proposal had been laid in Parliament on 4 November 2024, indicative fees set out below;

Enhanced	Standard	Update Service	Basic
£49.50	£21.50	£16.00	£21.50

The fee for each of the above is set at its own unit cost, with the aim of full cost recovery for each product. These fees are reviewed annually to ensure they remain appropriate and deliver value for money for both the customer and the public purse.

KD confirmed there was no 'contingency' fee included in the fees and charges.

3. Taxi Licensing Policy Consultation

Drivers were reminded that the taxi licensing policy was reviewed every 5 years. The draft Policy was proposed to be effective from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2030. The public consultation was open until Tuesday 3 December 2024, and everyone's views were welcome to be submitted via **email:** licensing@runnymede.gov.uk

KD outlined the key changes to the Policy, made in line with updated guidance, statutory standards, related Council policies, benchmarking with other Surrey Licensing Authorities and practical experience of administering the licensing regime. These were summarised as:

- A new section on compliance and enforcement
- Updates to the driver licensing requirements in respect of work area declarations, certificates of good conduct, medical fitness, language proficiency and holistic assessment of information about drivers when determining any action against them
- Updates to vehicle licensing including carrying children safely, fire extinguishers and CCTV
- New emission standards/environmental policy approach to licensing vehicles in that the Council will only licence hackney carriage and private hire vehicles (new and renewal) which are Ultra Low Emission Vehicles (ULEV) as defined by the Vehicle Certification Agency (i.e. Euro 4 petrol and Euro 6 diesel) from 1st January 2030, noting that 84% of the trade were already compliant
- Updates to Operator licensing in respect of health and safety management, disability awareness training and the location of an Operators office base
- Substantial updates to Appendix D relating to the relevance of convictions, cautions and driving licence endorsements in line with national standards
- Updating the Knowledge test policy

A more detailed description of each of the main changes, including the part and section number in the Policy document or Appendix, was available on the Council's website.

The Council's Regulatory Committee would meet again in January 2025 approve the updated policy.

JT confirmed that strong representations on behalf of the trade had been made in respect of not introducing a mandatory requirement for the trade to have electric only (zero emission) vehicles.

JT confirmed that there were no geographical barriers for the private hire trade provided the driver/vehicle/operator were licensed with the same authority.

4. VAT treatment of private hire vehicles

KD reminded people that the government ran a public consultation until August on the potential tax impacts of recent High Court judgments on transport legislation. One option proposed by the Treasury was to simply remove the requirement for private hire vehicles to be booked through a licensed operator.

Uber had brought a case following a 2021 decision by the Supreme Court that its drivers were 'workers', which had an impact on Uber's tax and other obligations. Uber then sought a declaration that private-hire taxi operators enter into a contract with passengers and the High Court ruled in its favour last year. That decision meant that operators outside of London must pay a tax charge on their profit margins (VAT at 20%). However, the ruling was reversed by the Court of Appeal in July 2024, following a challenge by private hire operators.

Responses from the consultation were currently being analysed, however the Court of Appeal ruling stands at this time, but it is currently unclear whether the case will be further considered by the Supreme Court.

5. Enforcement

JT reported that further to the multiagency joint enforcement operation carried out in June, staff from the Licensing Team joined partner agencies at Runnymede Pleasure Grounds on 9 October. Another successful exercise was held with local Runnymede Police teams, Surrey and Sussex Police Commercial Vehicle unit, Environmental Health, Community Safety and the HMRC mobile enforcement team. JT said that approximately 40 vehicles were stopped, including 14 taxis, 21 waste carriers and there were 29 fuel tank 'dips' to check for red diesel. Of these taxis, a significant number were TfL licensed vehicles.

Uber now had over 100,000 drivers in the UK and were also doing school runs under contract. JT considered that the TfL licensing procedures were stringent and their Knowledge test was stricter than RBC's.

6. Stealth / Ghost plates

Licence holders were reminded that under the Road Vehicles (Display of Registration Marks) Regulations 2001, it was illegal to alter any characters or apply or use material which makes a number plate retroreflective.

Stealth plates, also known as 'ghost plates', or '4D plates' used a special reflective coating on the letter or number characters in order to avoid detection by ANPR cameras. These infrared cameras were used to catch those speeding or driving where they shouldn't be (e.g. bus and cycle lanes, yellow box junctions and other areas such as London's ULEZ).

KD set out the following stipulations:

- No reflex-reflecting material may be applied to any part of a registration plate and the plate must not be treated in such a way that the characters of the registration mark become, or are caused to act as, retroreflective characters;
- The characters must not be removable;
- If your number plates were fitted after 1 September 2021, they must be a single shade of black;
- You cannot rearrange letters or numbers, or alter them so that they're hard to read or less easily distinguishable to the eye or to a camera;
- You can only get a number plate made up from a registered number plate supplier.

KD confirmed that 3D (raised) characters were allowed.

It was noted that Wolverhampton City Council was the first local authority to introduce new technology which could detect illegal plates. Drivers caught with them fitted to their cars receive a £100 penalty charge notice (PCN).

A Police Operation was carried out in the Heathrow area in February 2024 and found that 40% of all licensed vehicles tested had Infrared suppressed stealth / ghost plates, which are illegal. Drivers were reminded that they could be fined up to £1,000, and their vehicle would fail its MOT test if driven with incorrectly displayed number plates.

It was noted that 2 drivers in Runnymede had been caught with stealth plates and the advice was re-iterated not to have them. These drivers were reported not to have known their plates were illegal so it was asked how one could check if theirs were okay. Initial suspicions would be raised if ANPR cameras were not recognising the plate 100% of the time.

7. Assistance Dogs update

It was recalled that a question regarding the requirement for restraining assistance dogs was discussed at the last forum. Advice for the secure transport of dogs and assistance dogs was added to the published forum notes.

The important point was that any dog should not distract the driver. KD stated that all assistance dogs were trained to lie quietly by their owners' feet and that drivers should allow the dog to remain under the physical control of the owner at all times.

KD advised that if the passenger was an assistance dog owner, to ask them if they would like their dog in the footwell next to them or in the back of the vehicle if suitable (for example if the vehicle is an estate car or hatchback with removable parcel shelf).

If the passenger wants their dog in the rear footwell, drivers might need to pull the front passenger seat forwards to increase space in the footwell. If the dog travels with its owner in the front foot well, drivers were instructed not to disengage the passenger airbag.

8. AOB:

Drivers discussed the potential for forming a private hire partnership to reduce cost of operating, noting that there could only be one named person on an Operator's licence. It was asked whether the lack of ranks in the borough that were not operated by SWR would have an effect on future fees. JT and others had made numerous enquiries in the past about providing ranks in Egham and Addlestone, which had not come to anything. It was confirmed that it was a lengthy and often problematic process of providing ranks on the Highway which are under the jurisdiction of Surrey County Council. The benefits for Hackney Carriage drivers were limited without ranks, many were receiving little remuneration for long hours worked. NC received a compliment for her administration and assistance to drivers.

Action points: JT/KD to re-consider alternative provision of ranks in Egham to include suitability and feasibility of School Lane

It was noted that the next forum would be in February 2025, date and location to be confirmed.

The forum finished at 12:40 and everyone was thanked for their attendance.