PRESENT: Councillor Victoria Oldham in the Chair. Councillors Trevor Chapman, Ed Darling, John Ennis, John Mann, Stuart Martin, Andrew Paraskos, Nigel Simms, Norman Waller and Robert Windass.

Late Arrivals: None

Early Departures: None

08/19 – APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Sue Lumby and Councillor Pauline McHardy.

(5.30 pm)

09/19 – DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST: Councillor Nigel Simms declared an interest in respect of Minute 14/19, this was not a pecuniary interest and therefore he remained in the meeting room and took part in the vote.

(5.30 pm)

10/19 – MINUTES: The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 5 June 2019 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

(Four Members voted for and there were six abstentions.)

(5.31 pm)

11/19 – EXEMPT INFORMATION: There were no exempt information items.

(5.32 pm)

12/19 – PUBLIC ARRANGEMENTS – QUESTIONS: Mr Kevin O’Boyle submitted a question under Standing Order 27 on 4 November 2019 that related to the proposed taxi fare increase. Mr O’Boyle submitted the following question but only read out the first paragraph:

My first question is, why has such a large increase been proposed? The trade has been complaining bitterly for some time about the lack of service we are receiving and the fact that this is deteriorating.

At this moment we are paying a lot of money for a very substandard service. This appears to have come about since Mr Richardson introduced a new working pattern within the licensing office, where work would be shared with individual departments ie. Hackney Carriage, Liquor Licensing, Gaming etc.

When this was introduced the Hackney Carriage Department lost a member of staff through redundancy. Why was this staff member not replaced?
LICENSING COMMITTEE

For the last 6.5 months we have been trying to arrange for Mr Richardson to attend a meeting with the trade to explain the deterioration in service and what improvements we may expect. Mr Richardson has been invited to two liaison meetings but sent apologies on both occasions.

At the last Liaison Meeting Mr Bentley admitted the service was not as it should be and stated that it takes time to train people to do this job. Why is this taking so long? Nothing conclusive came out of that meeting and we asked again for a meeting to be set up with Mr Richardson.

I am not going to go into detailed examples as to how the service has deteriorated but will bring to your attention that on one occasion I was trying to contact the Hackney Carriage Department which had been closed for two days. I later found out that the reason it was unmanned was because Mr Doyle was up the A61 chasing fly tippers. Two questions regarding this - why had the Hackney Carriage Department been left unmanned for two days?, and why is our ring-fenced account paying Mr Doyle’s wages to catch fly tippers? I am sure this is not an isolated incident.

To conclude, it is obvious that this new system is not working. Instead of saving money, the amount of increase required is losing money. One would ask why can’t we go back to the proven system where the trade paid for its own service without intrusion from other licencing departments?

Can we also please see the figures that equate to this percentage increase? We were recently told that these figures were not available.

If this increase is allowed there is also the suspicion from members of our trade that we are subsidising other departments. Can we please see proof that this is not the case?

The Chair thanked Mr O’Boyle for his question and gave the following response:

Dear Mr O’Boyle

The Licensing Committee report details the reasons for the proposed increase. In 2017/18 we budgeted for a small surplus and made a small surplus. In 2018/19 we budgeted for a £35k deficit (costs had increased but expected income had reduced) and made a £41k deficit. Income was more than budgeted but so were costs. In 2019/20 we increased some of the fees (not dual drivers) and so budgeted for increased income. But we still budgeted for a deficit, just a lower deficit than in 2018/19.

It is not sustainable to budget for deficits each year. It is anticipated that the reserve will be gone by the end of this year. This needs to be turned into a small operating surplus in following years to allow for unmet demand surveys etc.

For the draft 2020/21 budget the expenditure budget has increased by just less than £10k, primarily due to an updated staffing budget (inclusive of a 2.5% pay award and an increase in the pension rate). But income levels have been reviewed and
increased before any increase in fees and charges (based on recent trends). A 10% increase in fees has then been proposed which results in a small budgeted surplus.

In addition, it was always the case that we could not fully judge the impact of moving to 3 yearly drivers and 5 yearly operators licensing until the introduction periods were up for these.

You do not make it clear what you consider a service reduction. Perhaps it is a consequence of our ongoing modernising agenda, an example being an appointment based system rather than the traditional walk-in service. It is not always possible to speak to somebody immediately but appointments will always be made to reflect the urgency of the request and to be fair to all customers.

There was a redundancy but staffing levels have been maintained as described in the attached email sent to you on 13 June 2019. The position remains the same.

At the last Taxi Liaison Group meeting Mr Bentley did not say that the service was not as it should be. He described the new service structure again, referred to changes in staffing and the need to train new members of staff. The Group were reminded that if there is no one available to answer the phone immediately there is always the option to leave a message. Messages are picked up and responded to quickly and in compliance with corporate standard – the Council’s Customer Charter which applies to all services and is available on the Council’s website.

In relation to the Licensing Enforcement Officer being involved in a multi-agency day of action in the Ripon area I can confirm that this was just one day (Tuesday 4 June 2019). I can also confirm that the day involved other agencies such as North Yorkshire Police, DVSA and targeted vehicles for various purposes including scrap metal, compliance with taxi and food safety law. Two of our Licensing Enforcement Officers were involved in the day. It is unfortunate that one of our Technical Support Officers was involved in an accident and was off work on that day. However, other staff were available to pick up requests and direct as appropriate.

Using the three Licensing Enforcement Officers (LEOs) to assist in delivering the broader licensing services provides increased resilience and continuity. The purpose is not to subsidise other services. The hackney carriage service still receives a full time equivalent LEO resource. One LEO is still responsible for taking the lead in the hackney carriage service. This is also the case for the Technical Support side of the service i.e. the staff that process the licence applications.

As you can see from the Licensing Committee report and the explanations given in this response, there is no cross subsidising between services. The Hackney Carriage income remains ring-fenced for that service.

(5.32 pm – 5.38 pm)
MATTER REFERRED TO COUNCIL FOR CONSIDERATION

13/19 – REVIEW OF CHARGES FOR SAFER COMMUNITIES LICENCES, PERMITS AND REGISTRATIONS 2020/21 INCLUDING THE HIGH HEDGE COMPLAINTS FEE: The Food, Licensing and Occupational Safety Manager (FLOSM) submitted a written report in relation to the review of Safer Communities discretionary charges for 2020/21 and the fee for dealing with the high hedge complaints that fell under the Terms of Reference of the Licensing Committee. The proposed fees and charges detailed in Appendix A included an increase of no less than 2.5% in line with the Medium Term Financial Strategy that was approved by Cabinet in July 2019. All recommended fees were rounded to the nearest £1 for simplicity. The exceptions to any increase were where the current charge for the service was already the maximum permitted by law. This was currently the case for gambling licences. The proposed fees and charges for High Hedge complaints also included an increase of 2.5%. The Licensing Committee had the authority to set the high hedge complaints fee but the administrative function sat with the place shaping service as opposed to the licensing service.

The FLOSM advised that with the exception of zoos and dangerous wild animals all animal licences were comprehensively revised by the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018. As a result, standardised statutory procedures and mandatory conditions now applied across England. Animal licence fees were however determined locally and the fees were set in 2019/20 for the first time. It was agreed that a review of these fees was deferred until the next Licensing Committee on 15 January 2020 to allow for a detailed review when the new regime would have been operating fully for one year.

The Committee had agreed park home fees on the 16 January 2019 and agreed that they would be implemented in Q1 of 2020/21. The scrap metal dealers licence fees were also included in Appendix A but due to a legal obligation were recommended to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Communities for decision.

RECOMMENDED (UNANIMOUSLY):

That (1) the revised licence fees be approved for 2020/21 as detailed in Appendix A;

(2) the review of the new licence fees relating to the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018 be deferred until the next Licensing Committee on 15 January 2020;

(3) the Licensing Committee recommends to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Communities that the proposed fees in relation to scrap metal licences be approved; and

(4) the fee for high hedge complaints be increased to £395.

(5.38 pm – 5.49 pm)