

Gravesham and Medway Shared Licensing Service Update**A. Use of resources overview**

The COVID-19 pandemic and initial lockdown had a major impact on the way in which we operated. Despite the challenges of the lockdowns and a seemingly constant stream of change and uncertainty along with legislative changes, the Licensing Team had to adapt quickly in order to continue operating the council's licensing functions within existing statutory timescales. The changes made to our processes resulted in our ability to continue operating our service during subsequent lockdowns with no negative impact. Having a full time Licensing Assistant on long term sick for over 20 months and who has now left, also put considerable additional pressures on the Licensing Team. However, we have not only stayed on top of our day-to-day statutory duties but are continuing to introduce more on-line applications to enhance our service provision, successfully adapt and implement operational changes.

Due to the pandemic in March last year and the subsequent restrictions put in place, we had been unable to resume pro-active visits following the Licensing data migration from Medway Council to Gravesham Borough Council and additional workload associated with setting up the shared service. Instead, visits were carried out on a re-active, intelligence led and risk-rated basis only after remote efforts were exhausted in accordance with Health and Safety Executive advice to protect the health and safety of our own employees and to ensure compliance with Government guidance.

In anticipation of resuming pro-active inspections and partnership working when Covid-19 regulations permitted, we have carried out a review of our reporting indicators to provide a more effective and accountable reporting tool, which came into effect on 1 April this year and we have recently started to carry out some pro-active compliance and enforcement visits. We are planning to resume joint operations with partnerships agencies.

The Licensing Manager attended weekly Bronze Cell meetings with internal departments including Environmental Health, Trading Standards, Highways, Town Centre Managers and Kent Police to discuss and resolve any issues arising from the relaxation of Covid restrictions and the reopening of the hospitality sector.

The shared service is continuing to benefit from the larger pool of knowledge, experience and talents within the team; the sharing of appropriate information; new processes; better systems and the adoption of best practice. We are continuing to improve and streamline a significant number of services through shared service digitisation and other operational improvements.

Budget expenditure continues to be used wisely and savings made where possible to reduce budget pressures. The increased use of digital media and contact via

email has reduced printing and postage costs. Service changes that attract additional costs may be recoverable through locally set licence fees, and this will always be considered to ensure the service operates on a cost-neutral basis.

Budget monitoring and debt recovery is undertaken on a monthly basis.

B. Performance risks / emerging issues

Licensing legislation, guidance and best practice are frequently amended, which can make it difficult for licensing authorities to keep up. Maintaining a suitably staffed pool of officers will help to reduce the risk of changes going unnoticed, not being understood or implemented. Such an approach will also provide the resilience needed when providing statutory services, often to tight deadlines.

It remains the case that, during the transitional shared service period (during much of 2019) and the Covid-19 regulations following the pandemic in March last year, there was a reduction in non-statutory productivity, which is reflected in the compliance and enforcement figures contained in the Compliance and Enforcement Update report. The efficiencies made following the completion of the data migration and increasing suite of online processes has resulted in greater productivity and a better quality of service as reflected in the distinct lack of complaints against service.

C. New Ways of Working and Value for Money

Hybrid working during lockdown proved effective and is continuing with staff predominantly working from home on work-issued laptops with full access to all relevant systems and attending the office a minimum of two days per week to ensure telephones are answered and to deal with post, scanning and distributing via email.

Staff communicate via email wherever possible in order to speed up communication channels without the cost of postage or time spent on a phone call, which enables customers to access their correspondence online at their convenience.

We have added Hackney Carriage and Private Hire applications to our suite of online applications. This was prioritised following the lockdown in March to enable drivers to renew their licences and continue working. House to House and Street Collections are currently being worked on.

The Hackney Carriage and Private Hire internal plates and ID badges have been redesigned, created and are now issued which has resulted in a more streamlined process thereby reducing the administrative burden on officers and reducing environmental impact. Paper driver licences are no longer issued following the

incorporation of the licence conditions into the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire policy. This too has resulted in saving paper, time and the environment. The electronic reminders and renewal system, which provides an enhanced service to our customers, has been created and has been in operation since the first lockdown.

Online payments ensure that money owed to the council is both paid, and paid into the correct account; helping to rectify ongoing problems with the collection of licensing fees at Medway using the previous arrangements.

D. Workforce development (including recruitment, retention and development including equalities in relation to staff)

Following the restructure in 2019 the Licensing Team have achieved:

- greater resilience and career progression/staff development opportunities for all staff;
- greater clarity in terms of job roles and responsibilities;
- pay consistency amongst colleagues;
- wider sharing of responsibilities to enable tasks to be carried out in a more reliable, efficient and effective manner, thereby facilitating meaningful development of the shared licensing service and a better level of service;
- reduced uncertainty/ambiguity, and increased sense of purpose, to assist with staff retention and job satisfaction;
- financial budgetary savings to both councils; and
- Professional Licensing Practitioner's qualification obtained by Licensing Officers, Senior Licensing Officers and the Licensing Manager

Training necessarily took a back seat during 20/21, however this has now resumed to further enhance the team's knowledge base and competencies.

The structure that has been in effect since April 2019 is depicted below:

APPENDIX A

