

Gravesham and Medway Shared Licensing Service Update

Overview of the shared service arrangement

The Shared Licensing Service sits within Gravesham Borough Council's Regulatory Services, within the Communities directorate.

The team are responsible for discharging Gravesham Borough Council's and Medway Council's licensing functions in terms of administering and regulating the licensing regimes in respect of:

- Premises/clubs selling alcohol or providing regulated entertainment or late-night refreshment
- Temporary Event Notices
- Personal alcohol licences
- Taxi and private hire drivers and vehicles, and private hire operators
- Gambling premises and activities
- Sex establishments
- Scrap metal
- Charitable collections
- Street Trading

The original Licensing Service Structure, put in place when the shared service commenced is shown in Annex 1.

In November 2022, the team became fully staffed for the first time since the commencement of the shared service following successful recruitment to the vacant Licensing Assistant and Licensing Apprentice posts. This enabled progress to be made in carrying out proactive compliance and enforcement activities including fee collection and associated interventions following non-payment.

Around the same time, two members of the team were awarded additional duties payments to reflect roles in which they were 'acting up', and changes temporarily made to reporting lines within the team. These changes are reflected in the temporary Licensing Service Structure shown in Annex 2.

However, in summer 2023 one of the Licensing Officers and a Licensing Assistant resigned (both for non-work-related reasons). The impacts of this on pro-active compliance and enforcement and other areas of work were further compounded by two additional members of staff being absent on long term sickness during the October and November, resulting in the team having to re-focus on statutory duties pending approval for recruitment to the vacant posts.

Following the successes of the temporary structure which proved to work well operationally, as well as in providing greater career progression opportunities and succession planning measures this structure was made permanent and recruit to the vacant posts approved.

A copy of the current Licensing Service Structure reflecting this is attached at Annex 3.

The resultant vacant Licensing Assistant and Licensing Apprentice posts have now been successfully filled, which has brought the team back to full capacity.

Throughout the team's periods of reduced capacity, staff remained committed to ensuring a high standard of service provision resulting in statutory duties and timescales being met, and monthly targeted officer interventions and enforcement in relation to unpaid/overdue annual premises licence fees across both authorities continuing.

Progress:

Efficiency savings

During 2023/24, the team has continued to build on their impressive suite of online licensing applications for both Medway and Gravesham.

All applications and requests for changes in relation to Hackney Carriage, Private Hire and Premises Licences have been completed and are live. The Premises Licence suite of online applications on GOV.UK forms for the Licensing Act 2003 applications have been disabled, enabling the team to manage all applications in a more efficient and reliable way.

The team are continuing to work with the IT and Digital Teams to create online applications for Club Premises Certificates, requests for changes and interactive online licensing registers to better meet customer expectations and reduce the burdens arising from FOI requests.

Added resilience across the two authorities

The original restructure retained the same number of posts as previously existed across the two separate teams, resulting in a larger, single pool of officers to provide added resilience to cover the work of both Licensing Authorities. This benefit remains in place, with subsequent restructures being implemented to support the emerging needs of the service.

This resilience has repeatedly proved essential to cope with the additional burdens arising from new and expanding/evolving licensing regimes, and in ensuring continuity of service during periods of staff shortages and absence through sickness and annual leave, for example.

The Team's ability through their hard work and dedication to provide an excellent shared service demonstrates the intended benefits of, and continued need for, maintaining a large pool of officers in a suitably structured team for resilience.

Availability of specialist skills across both authorities leading to increased efficiency; potential for a reduced requirement for external support from contractors etc

Access to a wider pool of specialists across both councils, e.g., Public Health, IT, Digital, Environmental Health, Legal and Finance, continues to support diversification of the advice and guidance available to the Shared Licensing Service to inform decisions, facilitate change, function effectively, and expand knowledge.

Sharing of best practice in the delivery of the Licensing Service and expansion of knowledge base of individual officers

The team continue to work effectively in a hybrid arrangement and liaise frequently with one another, including during ongoing weekly team meetings where they share information and collectively ascertain how to deal with more complex matters as part of cohesive and collaborative team working.

Regular attendance at the Kent and Medway Regulatory Licensing Steering Group and liaison with its members also supports this objective.

Delivering an enhanced digital service, making full use of available technology

The shared service continues to be highly successful and innovative in this regard. Updates demonstrating their ongoing efforts in relation to this are provided above.

According to their software system provider, they are amongst the most digitally advanced and innovative Licensing Services, benefiting from such solutions as online applications, automatic data population, automatic reminders, and clear yet comprehensive information and guidance pages on our website.

This assists the team in being able to cope with additional burdens and changes to licensing regimes.

Ensuring staff are adequately trained and supported

We have continued to support continuous professional and personal development through attendance of relevant (mostly virtual) training courses, seminars, coaching and mentoring, and experiential learning, etc. as referenced in the above paragraphs.

The Licensing Manager and Assistant Licensing Manager attended the 'By-stander' training arranged by Gravesham Borough Council and this will be disseminated to the rest of the team later in the year.

Most members of the team have also completed online accessibility training, which ensures that everything we place on our website, content and application forms, meets the accessibility requirements.

Management have continued to liaise with staff frequently and be available to them at all times with an open-door policy.

Realising procedural efficiencies to enable staff to recommence more field-based duties.

More field-based duties will now be able to recommence as a result of an appropriately resourced and structured team coupled with ongoing efforts to put in place efficient procedural processes.

Compliance and enforcement

Visits to licensed premises are continuing, either by way of a spot check, responding to a complaint received from a member of the public or as part of a joint operation with other responsible authorities and/or organisations, looking at specific types of premises, e.g. with the immigration team and/or food safety team to take-aways and restaurants.

Officers inspect Medway licensed hackney carriage and private hire vehicles by visiting taxi ranks, schools and prime locations such as supermarkets and train stations. These visits are continuing and carried out on ad-hoc days and times, including weekends and out of hours as and when appropriate. Inspections have identified only minor breaches such as not displaying door signs or minor body work damage.

Gambling premises audits are continuing alongside gambling premises inspections. To date, the premises visited have the correct permits/licences in place to ensure the correct permits are in place for the types of machines they have.

Licensed Operator audits are under way; no significant issues identified and correct licences in place.

Street Trading and Scrap Metal Licence compliance and enforcement is carried out by the Environmental Enforcement team on behalf of the Licensing Team. Between 2021 and 2023 they have successfully prosecuted 5 individuals for illegally trading a scrap metal dealers and have 3 pending. They have also investigated allegations of illegal street trading, giving advice when appropriate to ensure compliance and no prosecutions were necessary.

Debt collection

Debt collection continues monthly. Premises licence suspensions must be issued following non-payment of annual maintenance fees and the suspensions are lifted only once the debt is cleared. Chasing payment of outstanding fees is necessary, but an ongoing and time-consuming task. Licences cannot be revoked and therefore, licences for businesses that no longer trade are suspended.





