

Report of Head of Elections, Licensing and Registration

Report to Licensing Committee

Date: 3 April 2017

Subject: Information Report: Taxi & Private Hire Licensing Service Update on Progress

Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

Summary of main issues

- 1 This report is intended to give an update to Licensing Committee of the developments and improvements to the Taxi and Private Hire service over the past 6 months.
- 2 The service has made good progress in most of the improvement areas identified earlier, and is taking them forward, together with other developments and improvements.

Recommendations

1. That Members note the information in this report.

1 Purpose of this report

- 1.1 To brief members on the work the service has undertaken in the last 6 months and the improvements being worked upon moving forward.

2 Background information

- 2.1 The role of the Taxi and Private Hire Licensing service has always been recognised as an important council function in ensuring that the travelling public are safe with professional drivers who have attained good standards, safe vehicles and a dedicated enforcement team.
- 2.2 In recent years, the spotlight on licensing functions nationally has attracted much media attention, and across the country deficiencies in procedures have been identified which led to shocking effects on a large number of children's lives.
- 2.3 The Leeds City Council Executive Board in December 2015 commenced an overview of its taxi and private hire licensing functions, and officers were subject to scrutiny and accountability to the Cross-Council Safeguarding Group, the Licensing Committee, Central and Corporate Scrutiny Boards, and annually to the Executive Board.
- 2.4 The service has introduced new policies, including a strengthened Convictions Criteria policy and a safeguarding training requirement for all drivers and operators. The annual on-line DBS procedure has meant processing around 6,000 individuals into the new system over a 12 month cycle.
- 2.5 Additionally, new applicant numbers have increased, and the issue around managing footfall into the office and other contact has put enormous strain on the staff and resource capability.
- 2.6 The service also completed a near total restructure of the enforcement team; moving forward to offer a greater night time enforcement capability and, with the introduction of a new rota, working later into the night and more nights of the week to meet the challenges of the De-Regulation Act 2015.
- 2.7 A report was presented to Licensing Committee at its meeting in October 2016, focusing on service developments and improvements. A follow up report was promised to provide members with an update on progress made.

3 Main issues

- 3.1 Throughout 2016 the service worked closely with the Customer Access team to improve and re-engineer how we respond to contact with our client base. This has led to a number of initiatives being undertaken. In October, Licensing Committee received a report covering the following developments. This report provides an update on those issues, and some additional information.
- Digitising the service;
 - Email management;
 - Telephone enquiries;
 - Face to face visits (new item);
 - Web pages and digital;

- Resources;
- Wi-fi;
- ICT systems; and
- Workplace.

Digitising the service

- 3.2 The service has identified a number of benefits of digitising the service as much as possible and moving away from the paper file based service and administration processes. It will place much less reliance on possession of the paper file, allow more than one officer to access the digitised records, and will significantly reduce the time and stress in locating the paper file.
- 3.3 During 2017-18, all of the services' current paper files, in excess of 10,000, will be scanned onto the licensing system, starting with the files for vehicles, operators, contractors and escorts, and then progressing to the driver files. This will free up space in the licensing office, and should save time for customers and staff, and costs for the service, by making it possible for any officer to access and update information without needing the paper file. The service also plans to scan new information from the application stage, to ensure the advantages of digitised information are maximised during the initial application process.
- 3.4 The previous report in October 2016 suggested that once the scanned files are accessible via the licensing system, it would be possible for the service to give access to generic email and telephone enquiries by the contact centre and community hubs. This option will need to be evaluated once digitisation is complete, in order to determine the cost-benefit of opening up access to the system to different groups of staff, especially if the majority of information is available, and some key transactions, can be completed online (see section 4.4.1).

Emails

- 3.5 The service still receives a significant number of emails each month, around 300 emails per month. The response to emails has been given the same priority as answering telephone calls and responding to face to face contact.
- 3.6 The auto response to the service email account has been updated to signpost client contact back to the webpage in the first instance and includes specific links to where information is published so that customers may be able to assist themselves in the first instance. The service does still struggle on busy days to respond to all emails within 48 hours, but the service remains aware that answering emails effectively and in a timely way may reduce the need for customers to attend the office in person.

Telephone enquires

- 3.8 The service still receives an average of 2,000 telephone calls per month. The service is actively encouraging and promoting customers being able to book appointments instead of visiting the office. This is a major improvement for the trade and for the council.

- 3.9 The service will explore the potential for customer telephone calls to book appointments to be transferred to the contact centre, when the new appointment system is operating effectively. Outside of opening hours (Mon-Thurs 08:00-15:30, Fri 08:00-15:00), callers are not able to leave an answerphone, but are directed to the webpage where they can access information 24 hours a day, 365 days a week.
- 3.10 A change has also been made to the answer machine during working hours. This advises clients not to leave a second message to try and reduce repeat contacts. The message also signposts callers back to the webpage.

Face to face visits

- 3.11 The number of customers visiting the office has fallen slightly from the high levels seen in 2016, although customers still have to queue for more than 30 minutes, and the office's car park is frequently full. The service still experiences significant variations in customer visits – very busy on some days of the week, much quieter on Fridays.
- 3.12 The service found that customers often visit the office several times over the 12 month duration of their license. The service is actively exploring ways to reduce the queue through reducing the need to visit in person for each separate item (application/renewal, providing documents, attending training), and to encourage customers to book an appointment beforehand.
- 3.13 The additional temporary roles detailed in section 3.16 will strengthen the Licensing & Compliance team, and will provide a meet and greet service to intercept customers before they join the queue. In the long run, the service is aspiring for half of the visitors attending for pre-booked appointments, with the other half being customers who have resolutely chosen to queue.

Web pages and digital

- 3.14 The council has historically not had high expectations of taxi and private hire drivers and operators making great use of our web pages. A comprehensive review of the information held on the taxi and private hire licensing web pages was completed, using feedback from the contact centre web chat team, to ensure information was present on the webpage for the questions they were frequently asked.
- 3.15 An officer from taxi and private hire licensing now takes part in a 'digital champions' working group. The aim is to provide as much information online and through social media so that customers do not need to telephone, email or visit the licensing office in person for many enquiries. Further progress has been made in developing frequently asked questions for social media and online video tutorials to help guide customers through key stages of their license: application, disclosure and barring (DBS), renewal of licenses.

Resources

- 3.16 The two additional temporary Licensing and Compliance Officers started work in February 2017, and are undergoing induction training to develop the floor

walking/meet and greet role. This will have a significant positive impact on the busy reception area, and ensure that customers with any simple enquiries, not solely DBS, do not simply take a seat and wait to be seen. In addition, the early checking of documents will ensure that customers do not queue unnecessarily when they do not have the correct documents to hand.

- 3.17 The Disclosure & Barring team (one officer and four assistants) have had their temporary contracts extended by six months to September 2017. The team will oversee the transition towards all drivers and operators registering and staying registered with the national online Disclosure & Barring Service.
- 3.18 To reduce the administrative burden on Enforcement Officers and the Principal Vehicle Examiner, the new permanent role of Operational Support Assistant started work in March 2017. The post holder will collate court files, vehicle records, deal with witnesses and prioritise complaints, resolving minor issues at source.
- 3.19 A full-time Licensing Systems Development Officer post has been created. Interviews will be held during March 2017, and the successful candidate will start, no earlier than 1 May 2017. The post holder will support and develop the Uniform, Idox and workflow systems in line with the service improvements and other developments.
- 3.20 An additional full-time Vehicle Examiner post has been created. Interviews will be held during March 2017, and the successful candidate will start, no earlier than 1 May 2017. The post holder will work alongside the existing Principal Vehicle Examiner and four Vehicle Examiners to inspect vehicles.

Wi-Fi

- 3.21 Leeds Free Public Access Wi-Fi was fitted throughout the building to allow customers to access Wi-Fi, and enable staff to work flexibly on the ground floor and first floor. It will also support the use of a tablet to enable the floor walker to answer a wide range of enquiries about specific licensing records, while remaining at the front of the office.

ICT Systems

- 3.22 Renewal reminders for all licences are no longer sent by mail, and the service uses both text and email. A new appointment diary is being built in Sharepoint, and will go live in April 2017.
- 3.23 Laptops have been ordered for the whole of the Licensing Team to support the rota of floorwalking, counter and back office functions. The service is looking at the possibility of all the workforce at taxi and private hire licensing using laptops to facilitate a more flexible way of working. A tablet with a SIM card has been ordered for the 'meet and greet' officer to book appointments, take payments, print receipts and reminders. In the long run, it may be possible to use this device to send appointments to customers' smartphone diaries.
- 3.24 Proposals are being explored to move in stages to only accepting vehicle license renewals by post or email with on-line prepayment. This could potentially reduce the footfall by 3000+ per year.

- 3.25 A more contentious proposal is the option to move to a completely cashless service. The benefits are significant in terms of efficiency on daily cash reconciliation, security collection fees (around £4k), and reducing risk of crime against staff. The service will continue to promote online payment, and accept cheques. Two of the neighbouring authorities have moved their taxi and private hire licensing to cash free, each over a 12 month transition, so the service can learn from their experiences.

Workplace

- 3.26 The proposed workplace changes have made significant progress since the last report. The portacabin has been cleared of its' contents, and disposed to a local bowling club in March 2017. The container will also be disposed of. After some minor repairs to the road surface in the car park, the changes will free up 5 or 6 parking spaces.
- 3.27 The workplace changes to the offices will be undertaken in two separate projects, starting with the first floor, which started work in March 2017.
- 3.28 On the first floor, a number of walls will be removed to enable more staff hot desking and more flexible ways of working. The CCTV room and interview room will remain in use throughout the improvement works. Driver seminars have been moved to a training room nearby at Technorth for several weeks until the work is completed.
- 3.29 On the ground floor, the aim is to remove completely the built in storage for the paper files, and reconfigure the layout. The eight customer counters will be retained. This work will only be undertaken once the document digitisation is complete, although the staff on the ground floor will have use of laptops and the hot desking area on the first floor.

4 Corporate Considerations

4.1 Consultation and Engagement

- 4.1.1 The majority of information contained in this report has not been the subject of full consultation with the trade, as this stage covers resource and staffing proposals. However some details were shared and discussed at the most recent Private Hire and Hackney Carriage trade forums, and were generally supported.
- 4.1.2 Full consultation with the staff within the Taxi and Private Hire Licensing service has been undertaken and will continue as proposals are developed.
- 4.1.3 Further consultation will be undertaken with the licensed trade as improvement options are explored. The service will be engaging and consulting on a wide range of reviews and changes during 2017-18, both in response to the licensing and enforcement challenges posed by the effects of De-regulation Act, and on the Leeds specific improvements and developments.

4.2 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration

- 4.2.1 Equality and Cohesion Screening Assessments are carried out on the policies agreed at Licensing Committee which are used to inform decision making.
- 4.2.2 A request has been made for a prayer room on the ground floor. This will be reviewed as part of an Equality & Diversity Impact Assessment.

4.3 Council policies and City Priorities

4.3.1 The Taxi & Private Hire Licensing policies contribute to the following aims:

Best Council Plan 2013 -17

Towards being an Enterprising Council

Our Ambition and Approach

Our Ambition is for Leeds to be the best city and Leeds City Council to be the best council in the UK – fair, open and welcoming with an economy that is both prosperous and sustainable so all our communities are successful.

Our Approach is to adopt a new leadership style of civic enterprise, where the council becomes more enterprising, business and partners become more civic, and citizens become more actively engaged in the work of the city.

Our Best Council Outcomes

Make it easier for people to do business with us

Our Best Council Objectives

Promoting sustainable and inclusive economic growth – Improving the economic wellbeing of local people and businesses. With a focus on:

- Helping people into jobs,
- Boosting the local economy
- Generating income for the council

Ensuring high quality public services – improving quality, efficiency and involving people in shaping their city. With a focus on;

- Getting services right first time
- Improving customer satisfaction

4.3.2 The Taxi & Private Hire Licensing policies contribute to priorities:

- Reduce crime levels and their impact across Leeds
- Effectively tackle and reduce anti-social behaviour in communities

4.3.3 Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults:

4.3.4 Leeds City Council has both a moral and legal obligation to ensure the duty of care for both children and vulnerable adults across all of its services. This cannot be achieved by any single service or agency. Safeguarding is ultimately the responsibility of all of us and depends on the everyday vigilance of staff, who play a part in the lives of children or vulnerable adults.

4.4 Resources and value for money

4.4.1 The improvements and developments outlined in sections 3.2 to 3.29 have been funded from the existing budget and reserves. The council is currently undertaking consultation on a review of the budget and fees for the service, with an estimate that the annual fee income for the service will need to rise between £50,000 and £100,000 to fund the permanent changes in resourcing outlined in sections 3.18 to 3.20. At present, the future budget/fee plans do not include two areas of costs:

- the cost of transferring all or a large proportion of the 30,000 calls and emails to Customer Access; and
- the cost of paying a contractor to complete the digitisation/scanning if council staff are not able to complete the work quickly enough.

4.4.2 It should be noted that the Taxi and Private Hire Licensing service is cost neutral to the Council and by virtue of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1976, raises its own revenue by setting fees to meet the cost of issuing and administering licenses. This means that the additional costs associated with the proposals will be funded via license fees, and will not place additional pressure on the Council's budget.

4.5 Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In

4.5.1 There are no legal implications arising from these improvements, and they are not subject to call in or publication.

4.6 Risk Management

4.6.1 Consideration will be given to each proposal prior to introduction.

5 Conclusions

5.1 The opportunity to concentrate on service improvements and efficiencies is receiving the attention it deserves.

5.2 The service has made good progress in most of the improvement areas identified earlier, and is taking them forward, together with other developments and improvements.

5.3 Those proposals taken forward by officers will have regard to council policy, conditions and criteria approved by Licensing Committee.

6 Recommendations

6.1 That Members note the information in this report.