

Operational Services Cabinet Committee

Wednesday, 23 March 2022

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Lee Croxton (Chair)
Cllr Gurbax Singh (Vice-Chair)

Councillors: Conrad Broadley
Gary Harding
Nirmal Khabra
Leslie Pearton
Tony Rana
Alan Ridgers
Brian Sangha
Frank Wardle

Stuart Alford	Assistant Director (Operations)
Mark Lees	Regulatory Services Manager
Mandy Francis	Licensing Manager
Nicole Arthur	Service Manager (Housing Operations)
James Young	Parks & Open Space Manager
Elizabeth Thornton	Service Manager (Property & Regulatory Services)
Julie Francis-Beard	Committee Services Officer (Minutes)

27. Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Gurdip Ram Bungar and Cllr Tony Rana attended as his substitute.

28. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Operational Services Cabinet Committee held on Tuesday, 8 February 2022 were agreed and signed by the Chair.

29. Declarations of Interest

Cllr Nirmal Khabra declared an interest in Item 6 Hackney Carriage and Private hire Licensing Policy Review as he was a taxi driver in the Borough.

30. Annual Review of the Licensing Shared Service

The Regulatory Services Manager provided the Committee with a copy of the annual review that had been conducted in respect of the Licensing Shared Service with Medway Council.

Since January 2019, the council had in place a shared service with Medway Council for the delivery of the Licensing Services function. This involved the transfer of all Medway Council staff who were employed within Licensing Service at Medway to Gravesham Borough Council.

As such, the current Licensing Services team have been operational in their current format for just over three years (at the time of the review).

The report showed a continued success in the shared service over the last 3 years and showcased what having the right people on board can achieve. This is currently the only Gravesham led shared service.

The Regulatory Services Manager drew Members attention to the following:

- Despite the obvious challenges during the pandemic, the team have been able to ensure that the statutory functions have continued to be provided and there has not been a noticeable reduction in the day-to-day provision for our customers which is important in supporting local economy recovery coming out from the pandemic.
- Continued to expand the digital offering which will be enhanced going forward. Those digital services played a key role in the council's ability to function effectively during the pandemic when other licensing services were struggling as they were still paper based.
- The team are running on a slightly reduced capacity which is placing a strain on the team, that is only temporary though. The intention is, when fully staffed, to start providing a more proactive service and resume the field-based compliance enforcement activities for both districts.
- The set-up work is all complete on the shared service and is meeting all the objectives that were provided and is functioning really well.

Following questions and comments from Members, the Regulatory Services Manager explained that:

- The financial saving of just over £6,000 above what was predicted is now established and ongoing annually. If the council were to look at reusing that saving to increase field activities for enhancing enforcement, the best option would be to increase staffing provisions to provide that service. The systems and expertise are in place and an increase of staff would be able to support that.

The Chair thanked the Regulatory Services Manager and Licensing Manager and team for the detailed summary of the report and the hard work that had gone into the success of the shared service.

Resolved that this paper is for information purposes only.

31. Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy Review

The Regulatory Services Manager presented the Committee with the consultation responses received in respect of the proposed changes to the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy relating to inspections and Electric Vehicle (EV) requirements. Member input was sought in finalising the policy statement for publication and implementation.

The council has published a Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy since January 2009.

A report was subsequently brought before the Operational Services Cabinet Committee on 16 November 2021 setting out proposed revisions to these elements of the policy and an associated consultation methodology.

Members requested officers to proceed with the consultation as proposed and bring the results to a future meeting of the Operational Services Cabinet Committee for consideration.

Following the Members approval, the consultation ran for 8 weeks. This was doubled due to the Christmas and New Year period.

Fifty responses were received, all except one response received from a Ward Councillor, were from licensed drivers and / or operators. 37 of those responses were the same i.e. a response written by one licensed driver was mirrored by 36 others. 129 local licensed drivers, representing some 72.5% of the local trade, did not respond to the consultation. No other formal responses from interested parties were received.

The main concerns and queries to the proposal to move to electric vehicles by 2025 and 2030 respectively that were discussed at the November Committee were:

- The lack of charging infrastructure currently in place.
- The limited range of electric vehicles, both in terms of the different makes and models available and the mileage that can be covered on a full charge
- The cost involved in buying an electric vehicle.

These are all valid concerns and there is an expectation and reliance that as we move forward: charging facilities will become more widely available locally and nationally; the cost of buying electric vehicles will reduce, and; the technology will improve to provide greater journey ranges. The council is working with colleagues and KCC to install the first dedicated taxi and private hire chargers in the town centre area.

This is being proposed in support of the council's carbon neutral commitment.

If we move forward and the electric vehicle charging infrastructure does not move as quickly as the council expected, we do have the option of reviewing the policy at a later date to accommodate that. Although the first deadline that is being proposed is April 2025 for all newly licensed vehicles to be electric, if existing drivers change their vehicle prior to that date to another internal combustion engine model then provided it did not become un-licensable they would be able to continue to use this vehicle until 2030.

The main queries raised to the changes to the vehicle inspection proposals are;

- Costs that would be involved
- Whether it would be less safe, less reliable, less convenient and how it would affect licensing enforcement.

The council has committed that the cost of the MOT would not exceed the maximum cost (set nationally). In terms of safety, the proposed safety and standards inspection will include all the primary safety elements of an MOT and additional compliance checks to further improve standards. There will be no fundamental change to enforcement.

Brookvale Depot is centrally located and all mechanics are highly qualified and approved by both DVLA and Institute of Road Transport Engineers.

The other benefits are the fast, reliable transferrable information between the workshop and the Licensing Team to further enhance public safety which is the sole purpose of the Taxi and Private Hire Licensing regime.

Following questions and comments from Members, the Regulatory Services Manager explained that:

- The council is confident that enhanced electric charging infrastructure will be in place by 2025. The Regulatory Services Manager is also part of the Climate Change Working Group and is aware of new technology and infrastructure that is coming on board.
- The change from petrol / diesel to electric vehicles will happen gradually and the council will need to keep up with the demand.
- From 1 April 2025, all vehicle licence applications for newly licensed vehicles must be for vehicles that are powered wholly by electricity and from 1 April 2030, all vehicle licence applications must be for vehicles that are powered wholly by electricity.
- The Licensing Officers can depart from the policy where there are exceptional circumstances e.g. if a vehicle was written off soon after the 2025 deadline and were licensed for petrol / diesel a consideration would be that they could continue with a new vehicle that was the same; however each case would be assessed on its individual merits.
- If alternatively fuelled zero emission vehicles became available this could be integrated into the policy. Electric is the only clean source at present.
- Cllr Ridgers mentioned that he had attended a meeting recently and there is a Local Authority in East Kent that are boasting that they have 200 electric charging points.

Resolved that:

1. Having considered the consultation responses and associated officer comments, Members advised on any relevant amendments and instructed officers to update the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy accordingly.
2. That the Portfolio Holder for Operational Services approved the final policy without further need to report back to this Committee.

32. Update on Parks and Open Spaces

The Committee received a presentation from the Service Manager (Housing Operations) and Parks & Open Space Manager on an Update on Parks and Open Spaces.

The presentation can be viewed on the link below:

<https://democracy.gravesham.gov.uk/documents/s67753/Parks%20and%20Open%20Spaces%20presentation%20-%202022-23.pdf>

Following questions and comments from Members, the Service Manager (Housing Operations) and Parks & Open Space Manager explained that:

- Regarding open spaces and making those spaces look better for the community by planting and rewilding, the space outside the shops at The Hive belongs to Highways and not the council so there is nothing direct the council can do to improve that area. The council is currently working, in partnership, with KCC to improve the area.
- Members suggested different small areas of the borough that could be enhanced by bulb planting, adding splashes of colour and improving biodiversity. Some areas are:
 - The junction of Pelham Road and Darnley Road.
 - Cutmore Street next to the communal carpark would be one of these areas.
- It is important not just for us now but for the next generation to enjoy the surrounding areas where residents live or work whether that is either urban or rural areas.
- The health benefits of using green spaces, no matter how large or small the area is very important now.
- Members were pleased to see the first sensory play equipment being installed in the borough at Woodlands Park.
- At Camer Park more picnic benches have been installed including a wheelchair access bench.
- The improvements to open spaces will protect the wildlife and encourage more diverse habitats throughout the borough.

The Chair requested that Members look around their Wards and if any areas require improvements to contact the Service Manager (Housing Operations) and Parks & Open Space Manager

Members noted the contents of the presentation.

33. Corporate Performance Update: Quarter Three 2021-22

The Assistant Director (Operations) and Regulatory Services Manager presented the Committee with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the council's Corporate Plan, for Quarter Three 2021-22 (October to December 2021).

The officers went through each policy commitment in turn and provided an update on what activity had and/or would be delivered in order to successfully realise the policy commitments. The following comments were made by the officers during the update:

PI 3 – The Health and Safety incidents have remained low at 6 incidents in Q3 and these are due to accidents including slips and trips and a keg being dropped on someone's foot.

PI 4 – At the previous Committee, the Regulatory Services Manager assured the Committee that the percentage of compliant food establishments would increase when we finally came out of the pandemic. The Food Hygiene Team are now back to pre-covid levels of compliance and are inspecting more businesses.

PI 5 – The Environmental Health Teams are giving a first response to customers within five days in 99% of cases.

The Chair expressed his thanks on what an exceptional job the Environment Health Team do within the borough.

PI 9 – Residual waste has continued to increase and recycling has dropped slightly compared to last year. The council took a pragmatic view on waste collection during the

pandemic compared to other authorities and understood more people were working from home and had collected extra waste.

The council is now reverting back to, before the pandemic, where any side waste that is presented will receive a bin hanger on the bins. The Crews will report the issue which will generate a first letter to the resident to inform them of what they should be doing in the future with their waste.

A similar system is in operation regarding any contamination within the recycling bins and the system will generate a letter to residents explaining what they should have happened with that waste.

The Team is working with both primary and secondary schools to educate and work with the children regarding waste and recycling. The council is looking at trialling a digital newsletter that the school can send out to parents with information about recycling, waste and the effects of climate change.

As previously reported, the on-the-go bins have become really popular and they are going to be rolled out in Higham.

Increased recycling initiatives in conjunction with the Housing Team in reviewing the waste collections from housing sites. Reviews have been done on the whole site to make it easier for residents and for them to have a better understanding on what they should be doing and this will hopefully reduce fly-tipping.

Following questions and comments from Members, the Assistant Director (Operations) explained that:

- With regards to the bins sensors the data is only just being reviewed. When the trial started, the Crews were instructed to continue as normal so there was comparable data. The team have now started only emptying the bins when needed which is going very well. Over time, this will reduce the mileage and make the section more efficient.
- The Street Cleansing software can notify residents who have reported an issue to let them know the job has been completed.
- The system will give the team an opportunity to work smarter, the system will work out the jobs, the routes and which bins are in urgent need of being emptied.
- In the last couple of months, enhanced street cleansing has happened in the Dickens area which included the delivery of notices asking residents to move their cars at specific times. Although not many cars had been moved in preparation once the lorry came down the road, residents came out moved the cars. Residents also came out with brushes and cleaned their own area to be removed by the Street Cleansing Team. Delivering letters is time consuming so the Assistant Director (Operations) is looking at putting up signing around the area informing residents that area will be cleaned, asking for no parking on a certain date and time. The Team are looking at completing one half of the road and then the other and will try and undertake this work in the middle of the day to avoid school and work traffic.
- As the team is now receiving qualitative and quantitative data from these two trials, the Bartec Cleansing module and the bin sensor technology, feedback on this data will be brought to this Committee during the summer / autumn time. An opportunity will be given to demonstrate exactly how these systems work and how the council can develop it.

- Regarding the letter sent to residents regarding contamination in their recycling, the crews are able to report this on the system and a first letter is then generated. If there is a second offence within a six-month period, Officers will door knock and speak to the residents. Language barriers could be an issue, but the council is working towards using QR codes which would translate information and letters into the residents known language, as Gravesham is a multicultural borough.
- About 8 years ago, Gravesham were one of the early trendsetters in installing the smart compaction litter bins in the town centre. Other authorities are now using this technology. Newcastle City Council are currently using the bin sensors and Gravesham are in consultation with them to discuss and review how they are working and any improvement that could be made.
- The team are currently devising an action plan on how we can take the Bartec system forward.

The Chair and Committee thanked the teams for all their hard work they do to ensure the borough is much cleaner and tidier.

Resolved that this report is for information purposes only.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 8.55 pm