

Review of the Licensing Shared Service

(Shared Service Commenced: 01 January 2019)

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In line with all shared service/shared working arrangements, it is necessary to undertake an annual review of the arrangement. The purpose of the review is two-fold; to ensure that the shared service is delivering against its agreed objectives and to identify any improvements/changes that need to be made to ensure the successful continuation of the arrangement.

The objectives identified for the Licensing Shared Service are as follows:

- Efficiency savings. Realising actual financial savings across the two sites but maintaining delivery of the service.
- Added resilience across the two authorities. There will be a larger pool of officers covering both authorities providing additional resilience to cover sickness absence/vacancies or increased workload should this be required
- Availability of specialist skills across both authorities leading to increased efficiency; potential for a reduced requirement for external support from contractors etc.
- Sharing of best practice in the delivery of the Licensing Service
- Expansion of knowledge base of individual officers

In addition to the key objectives for the service, the following areas of focus for service were identified in the last annual review of the shared service:

- Completing the work required to 'set-up' the shared service, with full and prioritised support from other services as required.
- Delivering an enhanced digital service, making full use of available technology.
- Ensuring staff are adequately trained and supported.
- Realising procedural efficiencies to enable staff to recommence more field-based duties.

Review Findings

How is the shared service operating?

1. Has the shared service delivered on the objectives that are set out on page two of the review document?

Yes

No

In part

Please provide details of how the objectives have been met. If they haven't been met or have been met in part, please provide the reasons for this and any action identified to rectify this.

1. Efficiency savings. Realising actual financial savings across the two sites but maintaining delivery of the service.

In the last annual review, we reported that the Service had already made notable progress in developing/implementing more efficient processes for the mutual benefit of service users and officers such as the provision of online applications and payments, coupled with automated post-application processes and population of data into the back-office system, for Temporary Event Notices as well as Personal Licence, Taxi/Private Hire Driver Knowledge Test, and Taxi/Private Hire Vehicle Licence applications – and that the Team would soon be further expanding Gravesham's suite of online taxi and private hire application forms to Medway applicants, following the completion of the data migration project in mid-January 2020.

We now have a comprehensive and established suite of fourteen bespoke online application forms for all taxi and private hire matters, coupled with clear and accessible web-content, which has transformed the service provision for the better.

In addition, we now provide effective online application options for customers to apply for new premises licences, make payments for DBS checks, and change/update details in relation to a range of licences.

The ongoing financial savings arising from the comprehensive restructure which took effect from April 2019 following the TUPE transfer of all ex-Medway employees of the licensing team in January remain in place. No further financial savings have been realised in 20/21 or are anticipated at the current time. Further information relating to actual financial savings is given in section 4 of this report.

Whilst there is no scope to further increase savings at the current time, significant progress has been made in developing a much more reliable and effective method of collecting Medway's annual licensing fees which it is envisaged will increase income – see bullet b) below.

2. Added resilience across the two authorities. There will be a larger pool of officers covering both authorities providing additional resilience to cover sickness absence/vacancies or increased workload should this be required

The aforementioned restructure, which remains in place, 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, whilst also creating a clear structure to provide career progression/development opportunities for all staff.

Despite the team suffering an ongoing reduction in staff arising from long-term sickness, the service has continued to be progressive in developing better ways of working whilst

managing to maintain all statutory functions, thanks to collective hard work and dedication of the officers and managers directly involved, alongside colleagues in other areas such as Digital, Finance and IT with whom Licensing work closely. This has suitably demonstrated the intended benefit, and need, of maintaining a larger pool of offers for resilience.

It is considered that this has, at least in part, only been possible however because of all staff being, necessarily, more computer-based (i.e. not out on district) - initially due to the work required as part of the ongoing shared service set-up and, more recently, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is anticipated that once officers are able to carry out more frequent field-based work, any gaps will need to be filled to maintain the, largely statutory, office-based functions.

3. 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 council's, e.g. Public Health, IT, Digital, Environmental Health, Legal and Finance, continues to facilitate diversification of the advice and guidance available to the Shared Licensing Service to inform decisions, facilitate change, and expand knowledge.

4. Sharing of best practice in the delivery of the Licensing Service, &
5. Expansion of knowledge base of individual officers

All five front-line members of the team, i.e. the two Licensing Officers, two Senior Licensing Officers and the Licensing Manager have passed the Institute of Licensing accredited Professional Licensing Practitioner Qualification (PLPQ), making them a highly trained team of licensing practitioners. Additionally, our 'new' Licensing Assistant has proven to be a real asset to the team.

Training has necessarily taken a back-seat during 20/21, however courses have recently been booked over the coming months to further enhance the teams' knowledge base and competencies.

Staff have continued to frequently liaise with one another throughout the pandemic, albeit often remotely, to share information, collectively ascertain how to deal with particular matters, or share ideas for service improvements, for example.

Their knowledge and continued approach towards embracing change, coupled with a high level of managerial, administrative and technical support has continued to prove invaluable in progressing the shared service to date.

Regular (virtual) attendance at the Kent and Medway Regulatory Licensing Steering Group and IOL Regional Training Events, etc. also supports these objectives.

Additional areas of focus for service identified in the last annual review of the shared service:

- a) Completing the work required to 'set-up' the shared service, with full and prioritised support from other services as required.

In the last annual review we reported that the IT equipment that needed to be set up at Gun Wharf on the Gravesham network was needed to enable staff to work there effectively when necessary. Although this has not been progressed, since that time and as a result of the pandemic, significant progress has been made in facilitating agile working, enabling staff to work remotely from their GBC issued laptops. In addition, operational changes have significantly reduced/removed the need to officers to work from Gun Wharf on a routine basis. It is still envisaged that officers will need access to suitable workspaces in Medway in due course, however further consideration will need to be given to this pending a return to

'normality' and subject to enhanced agile working facilities, the use of Gun Wharf, and the operational needs at that time.

We also reported that key services at Medway, such as IT, need to be made more accessible to, and supportive for, shared service staff who are Gravesham employees as existing internal procedures and policies did not appear to take account of this (due to them no longer using a Medway domain email, not being listed as a Medway employee, or not having associated Medway permissions, for example) which at times made it incredibly challenging and time consuming to implement, what should have been, simple changes or get issues rectified. This remains a challenge at times – more recently also because of GBC not using Office 365 or Microsoft Teams - however the extent of the issue has diminished with staff gradually becoming less reliant on accessing the Medway network and it is understood that work is well underway with regard to Office 365 at Gravesham.

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

We continue to be highly successful in this regard, even receiving attention from other LAs across the country keen to learn more about our innovative solutions.

Updates demonstrating our ongoing successes in relation to this are provided under bullet point 1, above, and reflected in the staff feedback found in section 5.

In addition, the collection of Medway's annual licence fees is now carried out in a substantially more reliable and consistent way following the set-up of several hundreds of new debtors and Periodic Invoice Masters (PIMS) for automatic invoicing on GBCs finance systems. This way of working not only now aligns with Gravesham's but means, importantly, that all payments will now be reconcilable and paid to the correct income codes, and officers will therefore be able to identify and follow up on any overdue payments. This represents a significant achievement by the officers involved, which we are confident will achieve noticeably enhanced fee collection success rates and an overall increase in associated income for Medway.

c) Ensuring staff are adequately trained and supported.

See bullet point 5, above, re training.

Support has been more challenging during the pandemic, but management have continue to liaise with relevant staff frequently and be available to them at all times, and staff have continued to liaise frequently with one another and operate as a cohesive team.

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

It has not been viable to recommence more field-based duties due to the pandemic, however this still remains an area of focus when viable.

2. Have there been any other, unforeseen benefits, as a result of the shared service?

Yes

No

Please provide details of any other benefits, which were not anticipated at the start, which have come about as a result of the shared service.

N/A – all expected benefits have been/are being realised.

3. Have there been any unforeseen issues or problems resulting from the shared service?

Yes

No

Please provide details of any other issues or problems that have arisen which were not previously identified and how these have been managed/rectified.

No further unforeseen issues or problems resulting from the shared service have been identified since the last annual report.

The pandemic required near-instant, and significant, adaptations to be implemented by the team whose efforts cannot be overstated. The net result was that the service provision continued seamlessly, with all statutory functions and customer needs being maintained.

4. What has been the financial impact of the shared service on both authorities?

Please provide details of the financial impact of the shared service i.e. confirmation of any savings achieved, if these are above/below anticipated levels, any costs that were not previously considered or have arisen etc.

There have been no further financial implications or variances since the 2020/21 budget was set. The savings of £12,540 for GBC and £700 for Medway (not including an additional £23,215 annual saving already realised by Medway relating to the Licensing/Land Charges Manager post) previously reported, arising from the Licensing restructure, continue to be realised annually. Any overall variance within the service will be attributed to each authority at year-end 2020/21, and for 2021/22, budgets are set on a similar basis as currently set for 2020/21.

5. Feedback from officers involved in the shared service:

Please provide details of feedback that you have received from officers involved in the shared service. This section could be completed via a short team meeting for example, whereby officers' views are sought.

Officers were asked for their feedback at the start of February 2021. Their comments are given below:

"I feel like the service has done an incredible job, as we have all had to go through a huge amount of changes due to Covid. It has been a difficult period for us all but I do think that we have managed to keep the service running along relatively smoothly.

The taxi drivers at Medway have accepted that they have to now do everything online, and a huge chunk of the finance for Medway has now been sorted.

I do miss being in the office with everyone and having that easy access to a general query chat with the team but I know due to the current pandemic it is not possible, hopefully we will all go back to some sort of normal soon."

“It is very positive to see that with a few tweaks in the background, the service can run pretty much as normal remotely, with permits and licences still being issued electronically instead of by post where possible. The fact that virtually all of our forms can either be completed online or downloaded and sent in by email for either council goes to show that the service is going from strength to strength, and with plans for more forms to be online, we are making things even easier for applicants.”

“With the difficulties faced on the announcement of the first National Lockdown in March last year, the team really pulled together to get systems in place to ensure our continuity of service, which also enabled us to cope with the subsequent tier restrictions and further lockdown with no negative impact to our customers or service provision. Agile working and ability to communicate remotely has been a real benefit. There is a need to resume field work once restrictions are lifted and there are resource concerns associated with this, in light of our requirement to maintain our statutory functions, if we are not back to full capacity by then.”

“This last year has really tested us as a team. We were thrown into the unknown and it was a hard slog for us all.

Personally, I think we have come through it amazingly. There have been so many changes, temporary amendments and delays caused by the Pandemic, but we have worked through them as a team. By doing that the service hasn't been negatively affected. Applications have been processed and licences have been issued.

The lockdown has stopped any Uniform training being held, so the team are having to learn on the job. There has been many phone calls between the team, for clarification, but this has allowed us to still have general chats showing that we are supporting each other.

Despite all these problems, there has been a great improvement in the Medway finance area, with Licensing Act annual fees, Gambling Act annual fees all set and Lotteries being worked on. A quiet period at the beginning of the lockdown gave the team time to work through the Medway Premises licences and ensure that they are up to date on Uniform. There are other smaller projects that individuals have worked on as well. More digital forms are either already set up or in the pipe line. The Taxi policies for each Council are being reviewed to try and balance out any differences.

The delay in getting Windows 365 and Microsoft Teams has caused a couple of issues for the team such as making documents accessible. It isn't easy to get into a Teams meeting without it being set up on my laptop. With the Go-to meeting system I can access a meeting when at home and not when at work.”

“Working within the shared service has its challenges. However, the service is more efficient now that we have more of Medway's applications being submitted on line.

Predominantly we are working with the Uniform system now, no more Excel or Word, when creating licences which is of a great benefit. Everything in one place was the aim and I think we are gradually getting that together. I think the initial frustrations have been ironed out and even the trade are more positive with the on-line services.”

"Since giving my feedback last year, what can I say except, what a year! We thought going into a shared service was challenging and then came Covid. It has made me realise that we all have the resilience to get the job done, no matter how many, often weekly, changes to our procedures and practices we faced.

The first lockdown gave us a chance as a team to data cleanse our system which has been very beneficial.

Our digital application forms are great and I am looking forward to more of our applications being made available in this format.

I am pleased to say I am enjoying our shared service and long may that continue."

Moving forward with the shared service

6. Based on the review that has been undertaken will the shared service continue to operate?

Yes No

If 'No' please provide details of why it is felt that the shared service should not continue and any exit plans that have been discussed/agreed.

If the answer is 'Yes' but there are changes that need to be made to ensure the shared service is effective, please provide details of the changes that are required and how they will be addressed.

7. If the shared service is to continue to operate, what are the key areas of focus for the coming year for both authorities?

If answered 'Yes' to question 5, please provide details of the key aspects of work that are going to be undertaken in the year in order to ensure the shared service continues and is further strengthened.

- Ongoing progression towards an enhanced digital service, making full use of available technology.
- Ensuring staff are adequately trained and supported, and that staffing resources remain sufficient and fit for purpose.
- When viable, staff to recommence more field-based duties.

Summary of recommendations

Please list any recommendations that you feel need to be reviewed by the relevant Directors at both authorities. This may include changes to processes or potential supplement increases (if applicable) if it is felt that partnership is working well.

1.	Shared Service to continue, having regard to the key areas of focus outlined in section 7 above
2.	-
3.	-