

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Licensing Board – 13 May 2025

Report Title

Licensing Service Update 2024/25

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?

No

Report Author(s)

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Ward(s) Affected

Borough-Wide

Report Summary

This report provides an update in relation to the Licensing Service's performance against the Taxi and Private Hire Licensing Performance Framework and information regarding the general performance of the service.

The report also seeks to update the Licensing Board with regard to some proposed changes to the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy (which will be the subject of formal consultation later in the year).

Recommendations

1. That Members of the Licensing Board note the content of the update report.
2. That the Licensing Board provide feedback to the Licensing Manager in relation to any of the proposed revisions to the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy.

List of Appendices Included

Appendix 1 Licensing Performance Management Framework

Appendix 2 Licensing Enforcement Data

Appendix 3 Licensing Admin Data

Background Papers

Rotherham MBC Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

Not applicable

Council Approval Required

No.

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Licensing Service Update

1. Background

1.1 The performance of the Licensing Service is demonstrated by quarterly reporting to the Directorate Leadership Team in relation to the following measures:

- The number of on the spot inspections of taxis
- The percentage of taxis found to be compliant with the licensing regime during on the spot inspections
- Performance against the Licensing Service Performance Management Framework.
- The performance of the Council's licensing team in relation to quality assurance and administrative aspects of the service.

1.2 This report provides a summary of the Licensing Service's activity between 1st April 2024 and 31st March 2025 (inclusive). It includes details of actions taken by Enforcement Officers (what could be considered to be traditional enforcement actions) along with activity carried out by other officers within the Licensing Service, and the outcomes of Licensing Board Sub-Committee hearings.

1.3 In addition to the above, the report also details some of the current challenges being faced by the Service, outlines key areas of work and introduces the upcoming partial review of the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy with regard to:

- Clarification on the vehicle age and emissions requirements
- Amendment to vehicle signage and driver identification

Both of these aspects will be the subject of formal consultation later in 2025.

2. Key Issues

2.1 Unannounced inspections of vehicles and drivers

2.1.1 The Licensing Service has proactively inspected 121 vehicles and drivers during the period covered by this report. Of these, 97% of vehicles (117) and 94% of drivers (114) were found to be compliant with licensing requirements.

2.1.2 The vehicle non-compliances were primarily due to missing signage but also included the absence of a first aid kit and failures of vehicle lights. All of the defects that were identified were resolved the same day. Driver non-compliances related to the failure of the driver to wear their ID in the required manner. All of the drivers had their ID badge in their vehicle, and the non-compliances were rectified immediately (except in one case where the driver went home for his badge and then returned to the inspection site within 15 minutes).

- 2.1.4 Licensing Enforcement Officers will continue to undertake unannounced random checks in order to assess and ensure compliance with the requirements of the licensing policy and licence conditions.

2.2 Licensing Service Performance

- 2.2.1 The overall judgement outlined in the Louise Casey's inspection report (February 2015) stated that:

"Inspectors have found that Rotherham has not taken, and does not take, sufficient steps to ensure only fit and proper persons are permitted to hold a taxi licence. As a result, it cannot provide assurances that the public, including vulnerable people, are safe."

- 2.2.2 In order to ensure the Council's Licensing Service is effective, fit for purpose, and has addressed the concerns raised in Louise Casey's report; it is considered that the following outcomes must be demonstrated:

Outcome 1 All licence holders are "fit and proper" to hold licences.

Outcome 2 Trained decision makers must make high quality, appropriate and timely decisions that protect the public from risk of harm.

Outcome 3 The Licensing Service uses all available statutory powers appropriately, proactively and reactively, to disrupt criminal activity (including CSE and related activity).

Outcome 4 The licensing team must consistently provide high quality, timely processing of licensing applications.

Outcome 5 The Council's Private Hire and Hackney Carriage Licensing Policy will be effectively implemented.

- 2.2.3 In order to address each of these outcomes, the Licensing Service has implemented a Performance Management Framework. The Framework gives detail on a number of measures that will indicate whether the desired outcomes are being met.

- 2.2.4 Full detail on the performance against each of the measures is given in Appendix 1 to this report. Explanatory narrative is provided where there is an element of underperformance against the stated targets.

2.2.5 Targets have been set against a total of 16 performance measures, there are an additional four measures that are being monitored but a target has not been set in relation to them. The measures without a target are detailed below, along with explanatory narrative.

2.2.6 Of the 16 measures with targets, 2 were off target at the time of measurement – further detail on the reason for underperformance is given in Appendix 1, along with any management action that will/has been taken to address the underperformance. The measures without targets are detailed below.

2.2.7 **Delivery against individual training and development plan for each individual member of staff (contributing to Outcome 1).**

The training and development of staff is routinely monitored by the Principal Officer and Team Manager via monthly 1:1s and the Corporate My Year Ahead process. At the time of writing this report, every member of the Licensing Team had been through the My Year Ahead process.

2.2.8 **Data sharing concerns (when apparent) to be escalated by Assistant Director in a timely manner (contributing to Outcome 3).**

There have not been any data sharing concerns raised during the period covered by this report. This is an improvement on previous years and is testament to the work that has been carried out by Service management with regard to the relationship between the Council's Licensing Service and RMBC Children's Services, the National Crime Agency and South Yorkshire Police. Additional development work is ongoing with colleagues in RMBC Adult Services.

2.2.9 **Documented processes provided to and understood by all staff (contributing to Outcome 4).**

Documented procedures remain in place in relation to key processes within the Team, with several being refreshed/reviewed by the Principal Officers and Licensing Manager due to changes in the way that we interact with customers and in which work is allocated to individual officers.

2.2.10 **Processes are reviewed and (if appropriate) refreshed as required (contributing to Outcome 4).**

Processes are continually reviewed and where appropriate amended and reissued. During the 2024/25 financial year, we have made amendments to working practices relating to:

- The determination of licences in cases where vehicles do not meet the requirements of the vehicle age and emissions policy.
- The referral of applications to a Licensing Board Sub-Committee where there is no breach of the Council's Policy requirements.

2.3 Enforcement actions undertaken by the Licensing Service (including current position in relation to Court appeals).

2.3.1 The Council's General Enforcement Policy sets out the Council's approach to enforcement and demonstrates how individual enforcement services are adhering to the Principles of Good Regulation.

This report outlines the enforcement work undertaken in relation to the Licensing function, and provides detail on how the services ensure that such activity complies with the requirements of the Council's General Enforcement Policy.

2.3.2 Enforcement relating to the Council's Licensing function takes two forms:

- Enforcement related to the issuing of driver, vehicle and operator licences. This includes the appropriate application of the 'fit and proper' test (further details are contained within the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy). The correct application of the Policy will result in the grant, refusal, suspension or revocation of a licence. This process is administered by the Licensing admin team in conjunction with the Licensing Board. Action may be taken as a result of information provided by the licensing enforcement team, police, National Crime Agency or other statutory/non-statutory agency.
- Reactive investigations and proactive operations to establish/evaluate compliance with regulatory provisions and licence conditions. This takes the form of complaint investigations, pre-arranged enforcement operations (such as vehicle safety checks) and observations to identify non-compliance with Licensing requirements. Action may ultimately lead to the referral of licence holders to a Sub-Committee of the Council's Licensing Board and/or the instigation of legal proceedings in the criminal courts.

2.3.3 The Council is required to undertake enforcement in relation to its Licensing function, however, the way in which enforcement activity is undertaken is at the discretion of the Council. The vast majority of complaints are dealt with on an informal basis which means that they do not result in criminal proceedings.

2.3.4 The Licensing Service exercises its regulatory activities in a way which is:

- Proportionate – our activities will reflect the level of risk to the public and enforcement action taken will relate to the seriousness of the offence.
- Accountable – our activities will be open to public scrutiny, with clear and accessible policies, and fair and efficient complaints procedures.
- Consistent – our advice to those we regulate will be robust and reliable and we will respect advice provided by others. Where circumstances are similar, we will endeavour to act in similar ways to other local authorities.

- Transparent – we will ensure that those we regulate are able to understand what is expected of them and what they can anticipate in return.
- Targeted – we will focus our resources on higher risk enterprises and activities, reflecting local need and national priorities.

In undertaking its enforcement activities, the Council's Licensing Service needs to demonstrate compliance with these elements.

- 2.3.5 Information in relation to the activities of the Licensing Enforcement Team is attached to this report as Appendix 2.
- 2.3.6 Information in relation to the activities of the Licensing admin team is attached to this report as Appendix 3 (please note that this also includes enforcement actions undertaken as a result of decisions made following consideration of a matter by a Sub-Committee of the Council's Licensing Board).
- 2.3.7 Any person aggrieved by such a determination has the right of appeal to the Magistrates' Court, which must be exercised within 21 days of receipt of written notification of the decision.
- 2.3.8 Between 1st April 2024 and 31st March 2025 (inclusive), 15 appeals were listed for consideration by the Magistrates Court. These were in relation to decisions made by Licensing Officers and/or the Licensing Board (13 of these related to driver matters, and 2 to an operator licence).
- 2.3.9 One of these appeals was withdrawn by the appellant in the days prior to the hearing (Mr MC) – and was therefore not considered by the Court, but the Council's decision became effective as soon as the appeal was withdrawn.
- 2.3.10 One appeal was discharged by way of a Consent Order – this is where the Council agrees not to defend the appeal subject to certain conditions being met. This case related to a decision by to revoke an individual's licence due to his conduct on a school transport journey. The passage of time since the complaint and additional information that was provided during this time indicated that although the decision to revoke the licence was the correct course of action at the time, there were no longer concerns that the driver was not fit to hold a licence (Mr MS).
- 2.3.11 Of the remaining 13 appeal cases, 8 have yet to be finally determined by the Court. The 5 cases that have been considered by the Court all resulted in the Court finding that the Council's course of action was correct and the appeals were dismissed.
- 2.3.12 Further detail in relation to individual appeals is available on request. If Members wish to discuss any of these cases in further detail then this may be dealt with in the confidential part of the agenda.

2.3.13 Initial enforcement in relation to costs that are awarded is via the sundry debtors' process. Thereafter any costs remaining unpaid are pursued by via civil enforcement processes available through the County Court.

2.4 Service Challenges

2.4.1 Recruitment and staff retention:

There are currently five vacancies within the Licensing Team:

- Principal Licensing Enforcement Officer. This post has been vacant since the resignation of the previous post holder last year. Recruitment to this post is currently on hold pending a wider review of the Service.
- Senior Licensing Enforcement Officer. This post has been vacant for some time, and has been the subject of 4 rounds of recruitment during this period – all of which have been unsuccessful. Recruitment to this post is currently on hold pending a wider review of the Service.
- Licensing Enforcement Officer (3 posts). These posts have been vacant for around 12 months, recruitment to 2 of these posts is expected to take place in June 2025. Consideration is being given to the “conversation” of the remaining vacant post to enhance the resources within the administrative staff within the Team.

2.4.2 IT system:

The Licensing Service currently use 2 different IT systems for the administration, processing and recording of licence applications and activity.

Although these systems have been designed specifically for licensing, they are limited in relation to their future development and are hindering developments in the way that the service is delivered.

With this in mind, the Service is currently seeking a replacement to the existing systems and is working closely with colleagues within the Council's ICT and Procurement teams to ensure that a suitable replacement system is obtained at the earliest opportunity.

2.5 Key pieces of work

2.5.1 Taxi / Private Hire Licensing Policy review:

The Taxi and Private Hire Licensing Policy was reviewed in 2023 with many of the new requirements being implemented throughout 2024. Although the review (and subsequent revisions) were significant, the Council has committed to undertake a further review this year on 2 aspects of the revised Policy:

- Vehicle signage and driver identification.
- Clarification with regard to vehicle age and emissions requirements.

Members can be assured that the high standards in our Policy will remain, and the view of the Licensing Board will be taken into consideration during the Policy review.

2.5.2 Out of Town Vehicles:

As has been detailed in previous updates, the number of out of town vehicles working in Rotherham is increasing. Licensing Officers are working with neighbouring authorities and exploring all options that can be used to reduce the number of out of town vehicles working in Rotherham, which although lawful, exposes Rotherham residents to vehicles and drivers that do not meet the standards that we expect, and as a consequence risks to their safety.

2.5.7 Taxi camera system review:

Taxi cameras have been required in all RMBC licensed vehicles since 2015/16. Despite initial reservations from the trade, it is now generally accepted that the benefits of the cameras are significant – not least in relation to the protection of drivers and members of the public. Indeed, there are numerous examples where the footage from taxi cameras has assisted police enquiries, provided irrefutable evidence in relation to driver behaviour and has on a significant number of occasions protected drivers from malicious allegations.

However, the specification of the systems has not changed since the cameras were introduced. Advances in technology mean that it would be appropriate for this to be reviewed to ensure that the systems continue to protect passengers and drivers, and to make the process of downloading footage as efficient as possible.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

- 3.1 The report is for information only, and therefore no options/proposals are recommended. However, in relation to Enforcement work, the Service has a number of options available to it:

3.2 Compliance Advice, Guidance and Support

- 3.2.1 The Council uses compliance advice, guidance and support as a first response in the case of many breaches of legislation/licence condition that are identified. Advice is provided, sometimes in the form of a warning letter, to assist licence holders in rectifying breaches as quickly and efficiently as possible, avoiding the need for further enforcement action. A warning letter will set out what should be done to rectify the breach and to prevent re-occurrence. If a similar breach is identified in the future, this letter will be persuasive in considering the most appropriate enforcement action to take on that occasion. Such a letter cannot be cited in Court as a previous conviction but it may be presented in evidence and will illustrate a graduated, proportionate response in relation to enforcement.

3.3 Refusal / Suspension / Revocation of Licences

- 3.3.1 Licence applications will be refused where applicants are not considered to meet the standards/requirements that are required by the Council.
- 3.3.2 Where a licence holder fails to adhere to certain standards, acts inappropriately or breached a licence condition, the Council will review the licence by referring the matter to a Sub-Committee of the Council's Licensing Board. If it is shown, on the balance of probabilities, that the licence holder is no longer considered to be a 'fit and proper' person to hold a licence, then the review may lead to a revocation or suspension of the licence.
- 3.3.3 When considering future licence applications, the Council may take previous breaches and enforcement action into account.

3.4 Prosecution / simple caution

- 3.4.1 Licence holders that are shown to have committed significant breaches of licence condition (or unlicensed individuals that have undertaken licensable activity) may be the subject of legal proceedings by the Council. This may take one of two forms, a simple caution or a prosecution. Either of these options may be considered in conjunction with a revocation or suspension of a licence.
- 3.4.2 Simple cautions (previously known as 'formal cautions') are issued as an alternative to prosecution for some less serious criminal offences, where a person admits an offence and consents to the simple caution. Where a simple caution is offered and declined, the Council will proceed to a prosecution of the individual.
- 3.4.3 A simple caution for a criminal offence will appear on the offender's criminal record. It is likely to influence how the Council and others deal with any similar breaches in the future and may be cited in Court if the offender is subsequently prosecuted for a similar offence. If a simple caution is issued to an individual (rather than a corporation) it may have consequences if that individual seeks certain types of employment.
- 3.4.4 Simple cautions will be used in accordance with Home Office Circular 016/2008 and other relevant guidance.
- 3.4.5 The Council may prosecute in respect of more serious or recurrent breaches, or where other enforcement actions, such as voluntary undertakings or statutory notices have failed to secure compliance. When deciding whether to prosecute, the Council has regard to the provisions of The Code for Crown Prosecutors as issued by the Director of Public Prosecutions.

- 3.4.6 Prosecution will only be considered where the Council is satisfied that it has sufficient evidence to provide a realistic prospect of conviction against the defendant(s).
- 3.4.7 Before deciding that prosecution is appropriate, the Council will consider all relevant circumstances carefully and will have regard to the following public interest criteria:
- Seriousness of the offence committed
 - The level of culpability of the suspect
 - The circumstances of and the harm caused to the victim?
 - Was the suspect under the age of 18 at the time of the offence?
 - What is the impact on the community?
 - Is prosecution a proportionate response?
 - Do sources of information require protecting?
- 3.4.8 A successful prosecution will result in a criminal record. The Court may impose a fine and in respect of particularly serious breaches a prison sentence.
- 3.4.9 The conviction of an individual for an offence will require proof beyond reasonable doubt.
- 3.4.10 The selection of the most appropriate enforcement option in relation to a particular situation is determined by the investigating officer. That said, all enforcement cases are signed off by the Principal Licensing Officer prior to the investigation being closed. In addition, a sample of completed investigations is evaluated by service management as part of the Performance Management Framework in order to confirm that the correct action has been taken in all cases.

4. Consultation on proposal

- 4.1 Extensive consultation took place in relation to the development of the Policy requirements and the implementation of those requirements.
- 4.2 Further consultation will take place in relation to any future policy developments / reviews.

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

- 5.1 This report is for information and comment only, no decision is required.

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

- 6.1 There are no financial or procurement implications directly associated with this report.

- 6.2 There is, however, the risk of financial penalties (as outlined below) resulting from potential legal challenges if the Council does not provide an effective licensing service.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

- 7.1 Failure of the Licensing Service to effectively implement and administer the requirements of the Council's Policy may result in a legal challenge being made against the Council.
- 7.2 A successful legal challenge will have a financial and reputational impact on the Council – it is therefore essential that the Policy is implemented effectively and administered appropriately.
- 7.3 The Council must be able to demonstrate effectiveness of the policy and provide confidence and reassurance regarding its implementation.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

- 8.1 In order to ensure the effective implementation and application of the Policy and the ability to meet the performance measures, it is essential that all staff involved have the necessary knowledge and capability to undertake their role.
- 8.2 Staff understanding and awareness of the Policy and its effective application will be monitored by Team/Service Management at team meetings and periodic 1:1 meetings. Any development needs will be identified at these meetings and action taken as appropriate.
- 8.3 Effective communication within the Team, particularly in relation to Policy and performance matters, will ensure that the Council delivers a consistent approach to the implementation of the Policy. This will also provide a common understanding and appreciation of any issues that arise as a result of the Policy (and its implementation) allowing the Council to clarify or amend requirements as required.
- 8.4 In order to ensure the effective delivery of the Council's Licensing Enforcement function, it is essential that all staff involved have the necessary skills, knowledge and capability to undertake their role in accordance with legislative requirements, published guidance and the Council's General Enforcement Policy.
- 8.5 Competency is maintained via the undertaking of appropriate training and continued professional development, and assessment of competency as 1:1/supervision meetings which complement the annual Performance and Development Review cycle.
- 8.6 Any issues identified in relation to the enforcement work that is carried out are discussed with individual officers and corrective actions undertaken where necessary.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

- 9.1 Both the Jay report into Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) in Rotherham and the subsequent Corporate Governance Inspection led by Baroness Louise Casey CB identified issues, amongst which was the importance of having an effective Taxi Licensing Service.
- 9.2 In order to ensure the Council's Licensing Service is effective, fit for purpose, and has addressed the concerns raised in Baroness Casey's report, the following outcomes must be demonstrated:
- All licence holders are "fit and proper" to hold licences.
 - Trained decision makers must make high quality, appropriate and timely decisions that protect the public from risk of harm.
 - The Licensing Service uses all available statutory powers appropriately, proactively and reactively, to disrupt criminal activity (including CSE and related activity).
 - The licensing team must consistently provide high quality, timely processing of licensing applications.
 - The Council's Private Hire and Hackney Carriage Licensing Policy will be effectively implemented.
- 9.3 In order to address this, the Service has developed a Performance Management Framework and improvement plan to provide assurance that the outcomes identified above are achieved.
- 9.4 At the heart of the new Policy, Service Improvement Plan and the Performance Framework, lies a commitment to the protection of the public, safeguarding children and the vulnerable and the prevention of crime and disorder. The effective implementation of the Licensing Policy and the standards that it contains plays an important part in the protection of children and vulnerable people in Rotherham.
- 9.5 Since the publication of the report, the Licensing Team have been working with colleagues in Children's Services to ensure that those involved in the care and support of Looked After Children are aware of the key contacts within Licensing, the nature of information that can be passed on to the Licensing Team and the action that the Team can take as a result. This has been achieved by identifying single points of contact within the Business Regulation Service and Children's Services, and an agreed protocol for the sharing of information between services (making use of the formal, documented Local Authority Designated Officer procedures within Children's Services)

- 9.6 In addition, action has been taken to repair and formalise the information sharing processes within the Council and between its partners. This includes the regular attendance of a senior manager from the Council's regulatory service at the weekly Child Exploitation Tasking Group meetings that are chaired by South Yorkshire Police. Information that is discussed at the weekly meetings includes detail on offenders, victims and locations of concern. These meetings also provide a forum where a multi-agency approach to a problem can be discussed – if need be with formation of a separate task and finish group consisting of the various Council services and partner agencies.
- 9.7 The Service has also developed an excellent working relationship with the National Crime Agency, this sees the regular exchange of information in relation to potential concerns around licensed individuals/premises and on more than one occasion has resulted in the revocation of driver licenses with immediate effect.
- 9.8 The Council's Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy makes it clear that non-conviction information can be taken into consideration when making decisions regarding licensing matters (there had previously been a criticism that officers acted only when a licence holder had actually been convicted of an offence). The Policy confirms that the safety of the travelling public must be the paramount concern.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

- 10.1 In undertaking its Licensing function, the Council comply with relevant legislative requirements including the Human Rights Act 1998.
- 10.2 The Policy (along with the Council's General Enforcement Policy) will ensure the consistent and fair determination of licences – recognising that every individual is entitled to dignity and respect.
- 10.3 When making Licensing decisions, the Council and its officers aim to ensure there is no discrimination on the grounds of culture, ethnic or national origins, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation, political or religious beliefs, socio-economic status, or previous criminal conviction or caution which is not relevant to the current issue.
- 10.4 Adherence to these requirements are assured by means of officer awareness, observation, case reviews and both customer satisfaction and complaints received into the service. In addition, those affected by licensing decisions have the legal right to challenge that decision in the Magistrates Court.

11. Implications for CO₂ Emissions and Climate Change

- 11.1 There are no specific implications for CO₂ Emissions and Climate Change introduced by this report.

12. Implications for Partners

- 12.1 It is recognised that enforcement and compliance activity often cannot be carried out in isolation by the Council. Its key partnerships with other agencies e.g. South Yorkshire Police, HM Revenue and Customs and the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency are critical to ensure a comprehensive approach to regulation.

13. Risks and Mitigation

- 13.1 Failure of the Council to effectively discharge its Licensing function may compromise public safety.
- 13.2 The Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy and draft Performance Framework must give confidence to licence holders and the public of the effective performance management of Council processes and the transparency and fairness of the Council's approach to enforcement.
- 13.3 Responsibility for ensuring compliance with the Policy rests with Team and Service management, with appropriate overview and scrutiny by the Cabinet Member for Transport, Jobs and the Local Economy and members of the Licensing Board.
- 13.4 Failure of the Council to effectively discharge its licensing enforcement functions may compromise public safety.
- 13.5 Compliance with the General Enforcement Policy gives confidence to business and individuals of the transparency and fairness of the Council's approach to enforcement, without which the Council's reputation might be at risk.

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