



Northumberland

County Council

COMMITTEE: LICENSING & REGULATORY

DATE: 23RD OCTOBER 2019

Development of Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Services

Report of Head of Housing & Public Protection: Philip Soderquest

Cabinet Member: Cllr John Riddle, Portfolio Holder Planning, Housing and Resilience

Purpose of report: To advise Members of a regional programme to digitise as much of the taxi driver licensing process as possible.

Recommendations: That Members note the content of the Report.

Link to Corporate Plan: This Report is relevant to the 'How', 'Living', 'Connecting' and 'Thriving' priorities included in the NCC Corporate Plan 2018-2021.

Key issues:

1. Northumberland County Council Licensing Team has been working with the Teams in Sunderland and Gateshead to modernise the licensing application system for drivers of hackney carriages and private hire vehicles.
2. The project is being supported by Orangebus, a services and technology company, and was funded by a grant from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) through the Local Digital Fund.
3. The project team have delivered a 'Discovery Session' which was a progress report on what has been achieved so far and is now bidding for further funding for the next step.
4. The Team have identified that the project would have its greatest impact by focusing on new applications.
5. We have been advised that the bid for second round funding was unsuccessful. We will review the scheme and identify any benefits that can be introduced in Northumberland independently of any action taken by other partner authorities.

Background:

1. Licensing plays a key role in the protection of the passengers who use hackney carriage or private hire vehicle. The process, whilst required to meet the needs of the applicant, is however ultimately designed to identify any potential driver who may pose a risk to members of the travelling public.

2. To that end the current process includes knowledge tests and sexual exploitation and safeguarding training as well as Disclosure and Barring Service checks. The additional benefit of the tests and the training is that there is face-to-face contact with the applicant.
3. There is scope to streamline the application process so that there remains sufficient contact to address safety concerns whilst allowing drivers to submit information and documents and to make payments electronically.
4. Findings show delivering the licence service is time consuming for users and staff, involving paper-based applications, face-to-face appointments and repeated visits to council premises.
5. The Orangebus Team's research showed that there were variations in policies and procedures across the contributing authorities. These variations were sometimes caused by the structures within which licensing teams operated and what service they reported to. [For example, one service prioritised the service they provided to the applicant and downgraded some of the safety concerns that we have addressed at NCC.
6. This was sufficient of a concern for us that, at one point, we discussed withdrawing from the project until our concerns were afforded the priority status we felt they warranted.
7. The Team has spoken to both Licensing staff and applicants. They found that applicants and licence holders were comfortable with digital solutions and that there was an appetite to develop the project from drivers, operators and licensing staff. The research found that approximately 68% of authorities currently operate using only paper-based processes, with only 8% being fully digital.
8. The next stage of the project would have included further research to determine the scope of the required new service, such as how it will measure success, what would a successful service look like, as well as how impairments might affect users and whether some need assisted support.
9. Further research was to have examined the 'new driver' application process as a priority.
10. It will also increase understanding of the needs and opportunities of third parties, such as Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) course providers and the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS).
11. They would have evaluated the processes used by those services that have shifted to digital only to identify the best software to introduce regionally.
12. We will review the results of the exercise to date and identify next best steps for this Authority

Implications

Policy	None
Finance and value for money	The report does not identify any current financial considerations. It should streamline the service and may lead to less demand on staff but any decision to progress further, including procurement of a software package or any other costs associated with the project will be subject to a further report.
Legal	The new practices will operate within the current legislative framework.

Procurement	It may be necessary to procure a licensing application software package
Human Resources	It may reduce demand on the licensing service.
Property	N/A
Equalities	N/A
Risk Assessment	N/A
Crime & Disorder	Any new process will be as robust as at present in preventing those who are not fit and proper people from holding a licence to drive as at present
Customer Consideration	It should lead to improved customer service
Carbon reduction	N/A
Health and Wellbeing	N/A
Wards	None

Background papers:

Appendix A - Tackling the Risks in Taxi Licensing through Digital Solutions - Download from Orangebus.co.uk

Appendix B - Appendix B - Taxi Licensing User research report and recommendations summary

Report sign off.

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

	initials
Monitoring Officer/Legal	
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	
Relevant Executive Director	
Chief Executive	
Portfolio Holder(s)	

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