

Regulatory Committee

9.30am, Monday, 23 August 2021

Licensing Service – COVID-19 Recovery Plan

Executive/routine	
Wards	All
Council Commitments	

1. Recommendations

1.1 It is recommended that the Committee notes the content of the report.

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Licensing Service – COVID-19 Recovery Plan

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This report sets out the decisions made and the actions taken as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic since the last service update in [November 2020](#). The report also informs the Committee of the steps the service intends to take to ensure that it continues to deliver an efficient service and describes how a backlog of applications, which has been created as a result of the pandemic, is to be dealt with.

3. Background

- 3.1 In line with official guidance from the UK and Scottish Governments, all Council services implemented changes as a result of the lockdown measures introduced on 23 March 2020. At the same time all Regulatory and Licensing Sub Committee and Licensing Board meetings were suspended until further notice.
- 3.2 Placing customers at the heart of the Licensing Service has remained a key priority, and a number of measures and systems were immediately put in place to enable the Licensing Service to continue to operate.
- 3.3 Whilst balancing duties of care to members of staff, businesses and customers proved challenging, the majority of staff members were able to work from home. This meant that throughout the lockdown period the City of Edinburgh Council was one of the few Local Authorities that managed to maintain and operate a Licensing Service, with the team continuing to process renewal applications, which form 95% of the applications received, and to issue licences.
- 3.4 However, the temporary measures that were introduced to allow service to be maintained have presented some challenges, as is highlighted below.
- 3.5 The Council acts as Licensing Authority for a range of legislation, including the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 and the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982. The Council's activities as a Licensing Authority are funded directly by income raised from licence application fees. In a small number of cases fees are set by legislation, but the majority of fees charged are approved by the City of Edinburgh Council as part of the budget process. These fees are designed to fully recover the

costs of the service, as the provision of licensing services is not directly funded from the general revenue fund of the Council.

4. Main report

Operational Challenges

- 4.1 The Licensing Service has continued to operate throughout the entire COVID-19 pandemic, but this has not been without difficulties. Significant investment in mobile devices such as laptops, mobile phones and iPads has been necessary.
- 4.2 Whilst staff members have adapted well to working remotely, this has presented unique challenges due to the:
 - 4.2.1 Complexity of licensing in general, and issues with individual complex applications;
 - 4.2.2 Significant number of different licence types;
 - 4.2.3 Volume of applications;
 - 4.2.4 Inability to communicate with necessary consultees, many of whom were not working or unable to work during the lockdown periods; and
 - 4.2.5 Customer Hub, which would normally collect payments and carry out an initial check of applications to ensure it has been fully completed, has been closed.
- 4.3 These issues have created a backlog of applications to be processed, with approximately 9,151 applications outstanding at the time of writing.
- 4.4 Plans are continually being reviewed to address concerns arising from current circumstances and the backlog. Officers are prioritising new applications to ensure that applicants do not experience unnecessary delays which would prevent them from trading. Those who have submitted renewal applications can continue to trade whilst the application is processed and are therefore not disadvantaged. Moreover, resources from other areas of the Council have been brought in to process applications through the system.
- 4.5 New working practices have already been developed in a number of areas to help the service adapt to the remote working model. This pragmatic approach to the processing of applications, whilst ensuring all legal requirements are met will continue whilst the service operates under existing pressures. Staff have also been assigned to new areas of work as part of the ongoing development of the Centre of Excellence model being introduced across the Licensing Service.
- 4.6 Staff vacancies arose both prior to and during the lockdown period, but it was not possible to recruit. Recruitment continues to be actively pursued to fill a number of vacancies. The service is also liaising with the Council's agency staff provider to secure further resources at short notice to assist with the processing of applications and reducing the backlog.

Software Improvements – Move to Civica Cx

- 4.7 The Civica APP database system is used to record licensing applications. The system has a number of limitations which were known previously, but have been highlighted in recent Internal Audits. The system is a manual one with little internal automation to help progress licence applications. Additionally, the platform offers little or no interface with applicants which adds to the number of customer contacts which officers are asked to deal with. Coupled with the closure of the Customer Hub, where customers could lodge applications and seek advice, the above limitations have added to the backlog.
- 4.8 Throughout the lockdown period work has been ongoing to identify a more effective document management and storage system. Officers continue to carry out the work necessary to upgrade the current system to the Civica Cx system, which will:
- 4.8.1 Provide a digital platform enabling mobile working and channel shift to deliver an improved and more responsive service;
 - 4.8.2 Provide an integrated system that will enable customers to make, pay for and monitor progress of applications online;
 - 4.8.3 Give real-time access anywhere, anytime via a connected device;
 - 4.8.4 create channel shift to deliver time and cost savings; and
 - 4.8.5 support the introduction of a Short Term Lets Licensing system.
- 4.9 The upgrade to the Civica Cx system requires significant investment but will in the longer term provide significant efficiencies for the service and will improve the customer experience. The system will also make it less likely that application backlogs will be created in future.

Supporting Business Recovery

- 4.10 Throughout the pandemic the Licensing Service has sought to support the economic recovery of the city, and has introduced a number of measures to support licence holders.
- 4.11 The service continues to proactively make over 12,000 customer contacts per month via monthly newsletters, telephone calls, emails and social media. These contain the latest service updates as well as up to date info regarding COVID regulations. Additionally, a streamlined process to allow businesses to apply for the use of outdoor areas, along with an occasional licence to sell alcohol, has been created.
- 4.12 Although outwith the remit of the Committee, since 1 April 2021, the service has been responsible for processing 1,653 occasional applications and 544 outdoor area permit applications, which have helped businesses to make the most of outdoor spaces as lockdown measures have eased.

- 4.13 Furthermore, officers have continued to provide significant advice to the hospitality and events sector ahead of the summer period and any festival events that may take place. This advice has helped those businesses to comply with COVID regulations and assisted them to demonstrate that their events are safe. The service already successfully supported the re-opening of hospitality in July 2020 and April 2021 and will continue to play its part in the city's economic recovery.
- 4.14 In addition, the service has also administered Scottish Government grant funds to the taxi and private hire car trade. Earlier this year, officers administered the grant scheme for taxi and private hire car drivers, with over 13,000 payments made worth over £16m to the trade. Moreover, work is underway to make payments to taxi and private hire car owners, with 1,200 payments made so far. At the time of writing, officers are continuing to process grant funding applications from vehicle owners and aim to make payments to operators as quickly as possible, with over 1,500 payments worth a total of over £1.7m made so far.

5. Next Steps

- 5.1 The Licensing Service will continue to:
- 5.1.1 Work closely with the licensed trade to ensure understanding of the challenges faced;
 - 5.1.2 Make progress with the activities outlined in this report; and
 - 5.1.3 Comply with all COVID-19 guidance and Council arrangements for the delivery of services.
- 5.2 Working towards the new financial year, it is intended that a full service review will take place once the service is back to normal in order to identify further areas of improvement.

6. Financial impact

- 6.1 None.

7. Stakeholder/Community Impact

- 7.1 The contents and recommendations neither contribute to, nor detract from, the delivery of the three Public Sector Equality Duties.
- 7.2 The contents and recommendations described in the report do not deliver any outcomes relating to the ten areas of rights, nor do they enhance or infringe them.
- 7.3 There is no environmental impact arising from the contents of this report.

8. Background reading/external references

- 8.1 [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Contingency Measures: Update Report – 2 November 2020.](#)

9. Appendices

- 9.1 None.