

**LICENSING COMMITTEE****Wednesday, 13 April 2016**

**Present: Councillor Backhouse (Chairman)**  
**Councillors Mrs Cobbold, Dawlings, Heasman, Hills, Huggett, Noakes, Nuttall,**  
**Sloan (Vice-Chairman), Williams and Woodward**

**Officers in Attendance:** Sharon Degiorgio (Senior Licensing Officer), Robin Harris (Senior Lawyer (Contentious)), Claire Perry (Licensing Partnership Manager), Gary Stevenson (Head of Environment and Street Scene), Cheryl Clark (Democratic Services Officer) and Ashton West (Graduate Democratic Services Officer)

**Other Members in Attendance:** None.

**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

LC76/15 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Jamil, Patterson and Tompsett.

**DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST:**

LC77/15 No declarations of interest were made.

**NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS WISHING TO SPEAK (IN ACCORDANCE WITH COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 18):**

LC78/15 No visiting members were present or had registered to speak.

**REPORT OF HEAD OF ENVIRONMENT AND STREET SCENE - LICENSING PARTNERSHIP EXPANSION**

LC79/15 Mr Stevenson had submitted a report recommending to the Portfolio Holder for Sustainability that approval be given for the London Borough of Bexley's (LBB) Licensing Team functions to join the Licensing Partnership as a fourth and equal partner.

Mrs Perry opened proceedings by informing the Committee that the Licensing Partnership was now in its seventh year of successful operation and that following an approach by LBB it aimed to further reduce operating costs by extending the partnership to include them as an additional partner. She made clear that if LBB were to join, the Licensing Partnership would not include taxi licensing for LBB as this function was performed by Transport for London. She said that the current Administration Team staffing structure would continue, aided by the retention of a temporary administration officer based at Sevenoaks who would become permanent plus one member of staff to be located at LBB. She informed the committee that going forward LBB would effectively have the equivalent of two Licensing Officers, as had the existing Partnership members. The existing Licensing Partnership Manager would manage all four teams. She stressed that the existing performance indicator targets would remain in place as the Licensing Partnership was committed to maintaining an excellent level of service. Benefits of the extended partnership would include additional resilience and the sharing of officer skills and best practices.

No public speakers were present at the meeting. However, a representation had been received from Miss Toni Conlon, acting on behalf of the Tunbridge Wells Hackney Drivers Association (TWHDA). Following officer advice and at the discretion of the Chairman, Miss Conlon's statement was tabled at the meeting. In summary, TWHDA had questioned whether an entire licensing department (excluding taxi and private hire licensing) could be absorbed into the existing administration operation with the addition of only one temporary full time administration employee. They had also suggested that if it was the case that the existing administration operation had been overstaffed that a refund should be due to the TWHDA. They also suggested that if there was no overstaffing that service levels would therefore suffer as a result of the increased workload and the local authority's cost cutting measures should not be at the expense of service levels funded by the user.

Councillor Backhouse informed the Committee that he supported the proposal and believed that the addition of the LBB would bring much expertise of premises licensing into the Licensing Partnership.

Councillor Woodward asked how confusion would be avoided between the respective authorities' differing policies. Mrs Perry, responded by explaining that there were only very subtle differences in licensing policy other than for taxis, which was where most differences lay. Consequently, she anticipated few problems. In answer to a further question by Councillor Woodward, Mr Stevenson advised that each authority would be individually responsible for their own legal support costs. Councillor Woodward also asked if each authority charged the same amount for the services provided. Mrs Perry answered by explaining that most fees for licensing functions were set by central government, except the areas of gambling premises and street trading that were set by local authorities.

Councillor Woodward asked about the cost allocations between authorities. He also questioned the extent of LBB's current digital capacity compared with that of the existing Partnership members. Mrs Perry explained that the amount paid by each Partnership member was calculated on an annual basis, and was based on the last three complete years of transactions. A percentage figure was calculated for each member's share of the workload, and at 17.3% LBB would be due to pay around £75,000. Concerning LBB's digital handling of applications, Mrs Perry advised that it was not especially significant because the number of licensing applications received, other than temporary event notices, was no more than 10 per type each month, and therefore, this would have a limited impact on the weightings used to calculate costs. She added that efforts would be made to provide LBB with the same online application processing as existing Partnership members.

Councillor Sloan asked whether LBB had any other partnerships, with the exception of Transport for London, or if they had outsourced any of their functions. Councillor Backhouse noted that LBB shared car parking with the London Borough of Bromley but Mrs Perry advised that she was unaware of any other existing partnerships.

Mrs Perry responded to a question from Councillor Heasman that each of the existing authorities were expected to make a saving as a result of the integration of the additional partner and for Tunbridge Wells this figure would be around £14,500 annually.

Councillor Woodward sought reassurance that the transition of LBB into the existing partnership would be properly resourced, and that there would be as little impact on performance as possible. Mrs Perry confirmed that a full time employee from LBB would be retained, and that they would be principally responsible for overseeing the transition. In addition, the cost of a further full time employee had been retained in the budget to assist in the transition. Mrs Perry advised that performance indicators had hitherto been very high, at around 98%, and were significantly above target. She acknowledged that this position might drop slightly during integration but anticipated that targets would still be met.

Councillor Heasman asked whether there would be sufficient financial resources in place to cater for administering LBB as well as the current authorities. Mrs Perry confirmed that the budget had already been increased from £388,000 to £408,000 to cover increased staffing costs and that a further £26,000 was allocated for the retention of a full time employee at LBB. The total budget would cover the costs of all four partners.

Councillor Heasman asked about the steps to ensure that data transferred from LBB would be compatible and that such a transfer would go smoothly. Mrs Perry answered by explaining that this process would initially be undertaken manually by the administration officer at LBB and that they were exploring the option of using Idox to assist with data integration subject to there being no compatibility issues.

Councillor Backhouse asked for a response to the questions raised on behalf of the TWHDA to be included within the minutes. Mrs Perry confirmed that the partnership was not, and had not previously been, overstaffed in any way. She added that the proposal would result in further process improvements and would effectively provide a more efficient service in the future. Mr Stevenson endorsed this position and confirmed that, consequently, a refund would not be appropriate. He reiterated that ongoing efforts to streamline workload and move functions online had made the partnership more efficient and that had put them in the position to be able to incorporate an additional authority. Councillor Heasman acknowledged this position and voiced his opinion that greater use of IT systems would indeed lead to improvements in efficiency. Mrs Perry confirmed to Councillor Hills that the experience of the temporary officer at Sevenoaks would provide an added benefit during the integration period.

Mrs Perry explained in response to a question from Councillor Sloan that the estimated cost of £3000 quoted on in the report would be used for changes to the online forms, as a one-off cost borne by LBB and would not affect existing Partnership members.

As a result of the discussion and responses to questions, members of the Committee were happy to unanimously support the recommendation to the Portfolio Holder as discussed. The minutes of the meeting would be available in due course to additionally inform the decision.

**RESOLVED:** That it be recommended to the Portfolio Holder for Sustainability that approval be given for the London Borough of Bexley's Licensing Team functions to join the Licensing Partnership as a fourth and equal partner.

**URGENT BUSINESS:**

LC80/15      There were no items of urgent business.

**DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

LC81/15      **RESOLVED:** That the next Licensing Committee take place on Tuesday, 5 July 2016.

NOTE: The meeting concluded at 3.15 pm.