

## Animal Licensing Forum

Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> October 2020

### Zoom – Virtual Meeting

<b>Present:</b>	Steve Cobb (SC)	Licensing Manager (Chair)
	Molly Shiells	Licensing Officer
	Melanie Gillespie	Licensing Officer
	Charlie Skeels (CS)	Community Safety & Licensing Apprentice
	Georgia Gray	NHDC (minute taker)
	Jeanette Thompson (JT)	Service Director – Legal & Community
	Ben Salvatierra (BS)	EHO Central Beds Council (Part)
	Richard Johns (RJ)	EHO Central Beds Council (Part)
	Renate Burrows (RB)	Country Boarding for Cats & Dogs
	Jeremy Burrows (JB)	Country Boarding for Cats & Dogs
	Sally Marchant (SM)	Dalys Dogs
	Jo Roberts (JR)	Stagenhoe Cat Hotel
	Margaret Nyrvana-Jones (MNJ)	The Lodge Kennels
	Amanda Ringwood (AR)	Waggy Woofers

**Apologies:** Cllr Gary Grindal - Executive Member for Housing and Environmental Health

#### 1. Introduction

SC advised that no agenda has been set and the meeting has been set as an open forum for license holder to raise any questions or concerns.

#### 2. Apologies for absence

#### 3. Minutes from previous meeting

Minutes from the previous meeting were reviewed and agreed as accurate. No actions to comment on.

#### 4. Central Beds Renewal Process

SC advised that this year's forum will be a more informal meeting and invited BS & RJ to speak about the recent changes to the license renewal process.

BS explained that there have been a few teething problems but they are now settling down and it seems to be running smoothly. Some license holders have not fully understood the process and the importance of doing it in time.

SC questioned about the legislation stating renewals must be done 10 weeks prior to the licence expiring. To which BS confirmed yes, 10 weeks rather than last minute.

SC asked whether businesses have to stop trading if the renewal has not been received in the allotted time frame and BS replied stating it is at the discretion of the Local Authority.

SM (via chat) asked whether licence holders receive a reminder that their license is due for renewal.

SC confirmed that Local Authorities must follow the renewal process and have a duty to send renewal letters to license holders.

RJ confirmed that he didn't have anything additional to add to BS's comments.

#### **5. Business following Covid-19 – open to forum members to any raise concerns/questions.**

RB asked the other license holders present if they are back to business as normal for them all following Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. Also adding that licence holders may be starting to apply for their renewals while not knowing if they will still be operating in the next month let alone in 10 weeks' time.

SM answered stating that her business has still not recovered and has had no income from the boarding side of the business.

MNJ (via chat) added "We are all in trouble here".

AR answered by explaining she is part of several online forums with other license holder in the area as well as surrounding areas and it seems that across the board everyone is struggling even day-care facilities.

SC questioned whether any of the license holders took any of the financial help that was made available by central government and if so, did it help them in any way.

JB & RB could only apply for the funding that became available in June due to licence holders not being included within the first round of financial support as well as other methods.

SM explained that due to premises and income she was not eligible for any government financial support.

JR added that her business was too new to qualify for government funding therefore has to seek financial help through another method.

SC was aware that some license holders may not be able to access government funding and explained that the Council realise the situation they are in.

SC then addressed a point raised by SM via email regarding smaller fees for smaller businesses.

SM explained that Daly's Dogs is a side business and she only does small jobs therefore the license fee is a very large chunk for her to pay compared to someone with a larger

establishment who does it full time with employees. SM acknowledged that the fees pay for the admin of the issuing of the license and questioned whether anyone would receive an extension on their license due to Covid-19.

SC recalled the point being raised in last year's meeting and explained that at that point the fees were new to both licence holders and the Council and that North Herts District Council are not allowed to make any profit through the fees charged. Later explaining that he will be having a meeting with Cllr Gary Grindal regarding the fees.

SC informed everyone that the fees were due to increase in April 2020 however due to Covid-19 these were held back and the Council are preparing for what, if any, impact this will have to next year's fees. Also addressing that a tier system is being explored to see if this can be incorporated with the fees however can't give much more information regarding this yet as it is still being looked at.

In relation to whether an extension can be given to licence holders following Covid-19, this decision much be made by Members.

JT added that she appreciated this is a difficult situation for all and the Council are also working to make a large sum of savings for the year and reiterated that it must be an executive decision and went on to ask SC to check with executive member regarding points raised.

SC explained that similar conversations have taken place within taxi licensing and they are looking into a number of different ways to help them stay in business too as the Council would hate to see anyone go out of business because of Covid-19. Agreeing that all will be discussed in a meeting with Cllr Grindal.

RB added that they realise everyone is struggling and the Council's hands may be tied in relation to how much help they can provide licence holders and also addressed there is anomaly to central government help that they want to help yet license holders are still going to be charged despite a long period with no income. Going on to ask the group is there is anything they can come up with to help their businesses survive as it is becoming very difficult to survive.

AR explained that there has been talks in other forum groups of businesses continuing without a licence as there are lots of businesses operating with out one so many business owners are developing a 'what is the point' outlook but explained that she is encouraging those which are now having these views to stay licenced. AR also explained that she is personally considering a different career path and going back to previous sector of work.

SC addressed the number of licenced boarders in the district and that the public are getting better at checking with the Council whether a boarding facility is licenced. AR added that those who are licenced are pushing for other businesses to be licenced as much as possible and also addressed bringing unlicensed businesses to the council attention.

SC encouraged the Forum to inform the Council of these businesses so they can get in touch with them and briefly explained the process of officers informing businesses they need to be licensed and the consequences of continued non-compliance.

AR asked whether they have done any enforcements to unlicensed boarders. SC answered no.

**Update: One business was investigated for operating without a licence and subsequently moved out of the district. The licensing authority where they re-located were informed of their boarding business.**

JR explained that the licenced boarders struggle to charge more than unlicensed boarders to keep custom. However the licenced boarders are paying licence fees on top of overheads while the others are only paying overheads. SC again encouraged reporting unlicensed boarders to the Council.

AR queried the information the Council require in order to investigate unlicensed boarders and whether a home address is required. SC answered and explained that an address is ideal, in the initial stages a phone number is enough as officers will often call to try and get the licence issued which they have found is often enough. However if it is just a Facebook page they can provide that should be enough due to recent findings within NHDC about what can and cannot be done through social media. SC also explained that they in the process of having a dedicated Licencing Enforcement Facebook page set up.

SC went on to address Hannah has left the organisation and they have a new officer, Jasmine as well as Molly and Melanie.

RB explained that unlicensed businesses bring the whole sector down however with income and businesses how they are it's not the priority when families are taking their pets with them due to travel restrictions when normally they would use the boarding facilities. Adding that although the boarding side has slowed down they luckily have customers wishing to use their dog park and they are still carrying out a dog walking service. But would like to network ideas around other businesses to explore additional services they could potentially operate.

RB raised a request whether the Council could advertise through social media and their pathways the importance of using a licensed boarding facility and the risks that incur when using unlicensed boarders.

SC agreed that the trade should come together in some way to share ideas and although they are all competitors, they are all in the business for the care and welfare of the animals.

SC also agreed that a social media campaign is something the Council will do and asked CS to do this. CS said he was more than happy to do this and will also look at getting it into Outlook magazine too.

**Action: CS to arrange a social media campaign to promote the need to ensure the public only use licensed animal establishments**

SC explained that a full list of license holders was available on the NHDC webpage and pointed out that it was recently updated so the newest version is available. AR said that the document is much better now it is updated.

RJ brought to attention that there is guidance regarding whether license is issued to businesses whose income is less than £1000. SC explained this is partly correct but there are many other factors that must be met. Legislation explains that a business charging a fee must be licenced whereas guidance states that a business as defined by HMRC requires an income £1000. RJ queried whether NHDC would consider not licensing a boarding business if their income is less than £1000 as it is down to the local authority. SC answered that it is something he will give some thought to but reminded the Forum that less than £1000 does not negate the need for a licence.

RJ advise this could be done on a case by case basis and that businesses would need to supply licensing manager with information for them to consider then potentially issue a temporary licence until their income becomes over £1000. SM raised concern that all license holders are keen to discourage unlicensed boarding, and this could end up leaving current licensed businesses unlicensed. Could there be a lower fee for lower income businesses, so they are still licensed? RJ explained that from an admin perspective having a stepped fee could incur more costs which is why majority of local authorities have one set fee. AR added that by having a lower fee during lower income times it will be a good way to retain licensed boarders. RJ added that businesses could board animals if under £1000 threshold as long as the other factors have been met and suggested this could stop boarders going out of business.

JR explained that she paid her fee for a 3 year licence in March 2020, her income has now dropped massively since lockdown and hopes that by 2023 we are past the Covid-19 situation but asked whether their licenses would be compensated for. RJ explained that some local authorities have given extensions to the end of licenses to cover the lockdown period however it is managers digression.

SC then went through the issues with the legislation and guidance in relation to the £1000 income threshold and the preferred method would be a tiered fee but a significant amount of the fees are made up of future inspection charges and other factors.

JR apologises but had to leave the meeting.

SC asked the Forum if anyone had any other questions.

JB raised a concern that if the fees were to be tailored based on income it wouldn't work as businesses with larger income also have large overheads. SC raised an idea about fees for occasional/seasonal boarders but NHDC are still bound by legislation, but all issues raised are being minuted to be passed on and discussed. RJ added that if Central Beds come up with anything, they will share ideas with NHDC. SC suggested asking Herts & Beds Licensing group to include animal licensing as there are a lot of inconsistencies between areas and different authorities.

MNJ & AR entered group forum links via chat.

AR raised a question regarding the different regulations between Stevenage and NHDC as she operates her business from Gt. Ashby which is on the border and wasn't sure how different number of animal regulations are between the authorities. SC referred to BS or RJ to expand and explain if there was any flexibility in guidance. RJ explained there was no straight forward answer, the number of dogs allowed depends on a number of factors, but owners can ask for permission to board more and it will be reviewed on case by case basis. SC added that the licence can be re-assessed at any time. BS agreed that there are a number of factors that will determine number permitted.

SC reiterated to everyone so they are aware a license can be changed even if it hasn't expired or is due for renewal.

SC queried whether hosts or arrangers have to be licensed and it was agreed that he will discuss this with RJ & BS outside of this meeting.

RJ asked if Herts were to move into Tier 2 or 3 of Government lockdown rules will there be advice sent out to license holders regarding whether they can continue boarding and if yes to what extent, will it be for essential workers as during the first lock down there was no clarity and led it a lot of confusion for Central Beds. AR agreed there was no clarity. SC explained that through the first lockdown guidance was not clear for boarders but going forward, if government guidance drastically changes or we enter into higher tiers it would be possible for boarders to continue their services for essential workers, people in hospital or of ill health but they would ensure the information is distributed to license holders. SC & JB agreed that the guidance hasn't been clear through the

pandemic and SC asked that if anyone has any outside guidance to please share this with NHDC so we can distribute to license holders.

RB asked the Forum if any other boarded were having issues with veterinary practices not issuing kennel cough immunisation. All members including RJ & BS agreed that this is not something they had come across. RB explained that some veterinary practiced has stopped giving it through lockdown, but one vet is still not providing it as the immunisation is of a similar strain of Covid-19 so can potential put the owner at risk of contracting is they immunise the dog.

JT had a look on a website which stated it was very rare but can affect human respiratory problems if the owner already suffers from them. SC stated that he will keep an eye on this in case more than 1 vet stops issuing the vaccination and seek further advise.

SC asked if any other questions. None were raised.

## **6. AOB**

SC advised that in the last meeting it was agreed that these meetings would be held annually however given the Covid-19 situation he asked CS to set the next meeting as 6 months' time.

**Action: CS to arrange a Forum in April 2021.**