



Our ref: MJ/ke/1242

Date: 03 March 2015

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Cheshire East Council is committed to placing its residents first and ensuring the safety of our public. We have made a commitment to raising the awareness of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and to put this at the forefront of our agenda. This is an issue of national importance and I am writing to you to see your support in tackling the issues we face.

The recent reports into both Rochdale and Rotherham Councils have established that there is a real need for us to protect our young children from sexual exploitation and to realise the important role licensing plays in that process.

Our Licensing Team fully participates in the Council's CSE Operational Group and regularly shares pertinent information and intelligence that we may have. We have taken steps to raise awareness of this serious issue with our licensed trade and to ensure better reporting of potential occurrences. As a Council we are also committed to taking appropriate action against licence holders to disrupt and take away their ability to abuse.

It is vital that this Authority takes appropriate steps to tackle sexual exploitation, but it must also be recognised that in some areas our power to act is constrained by national legislation.

We have recently conducted an audit of the service, which raises some key action points. I would like to raise some of the issues that were identified within that audit as I would seek your support to amend the current legislative regime so that we can tackle issues that may never have been envisaged when the legislation was made.

- It was highlighted in the Independent investigation into the CSE issues in Rochdale that the Council had no way to cap the level of taxi driver licenses within the current legal framework. This was leading to an ever increasing number of taxi drivers with the same or a decreasing level of work, a consequence of which is the potential for an increasing number of taxi drivers to have spare time on their hands. In the current context and recent experiences of CSE this was not seen to be consistent with the needs of the community. The investigator believed that a national review of this situation is now necessary. We would ask that consideration is given to amending the

legislation to allow Councils to impose a cap on the number of driver licenses that can be issued.

- Cross-border hiring is a massive enforcement loophole. It is possible for a driver and vehicle to be licensed by one Council and operate wholly within the area of another Council. This allows the operation of that vehicle to slip through the powers of the two Councils. It would be subject to conditions and requirements of the Council who issued the licence, but any breaches of legislation would be the responsibility of the Council in whose area the offence took place. Because of this conflict it becomes difficult for Councils to regulate the licensed trade. This also allows a potential for those who may be involved in organised CSE to obtain licenses in one area and operate in another with some degree of anonymity.
- Cheshire East has committed to raising standards of our licensed drivers by requiring all applicants for the grant of a licence to hold either the Btec Level 2 Certificate in the introduction to the role of the Professional Taxi and Private Hire Driver or the NVQ Certificate in Road Passenger Vehicle driving (Taxi and Private Hire Driver). I am aware that there are a number of Councils who also make a professional qualification a requirement of the licensing process. However, neither of these courses have units or modules that include information on CSE. Cheshire East Council would support the move towards a mandatory qualification for all taxi drivers to include modules on CSE and for that to be implemented throughout England and Wales.
- To maintain standards across the Country we would also support the introduction of a minimum set of national standards for drivers and vehicles. This was proposed in the recent review undertaken by the Law Commission. Whilst there were some conclusions in the review that should be viewed with care and some opportunities for a needed overhaul of the regime missed this proposal should be given serious consideration. This is especially important given the inconsistent way different Councils consider offences or allegations when determining the fit and proper test. Given the cross-boarder hiring issue there may be instances where Cheshire East has refused to grant a licence because we do not consider them fit and proper but they then obtain licenses within another Authority, whilst still being able to work wholly with our area not having met our requirements.

I am hopeful that you will take these points forward and encourage improved standards to ensure public safety. We would look to work together to influence favourably any changes to the legislation that may be forthcoming. We have a real opportunity to make positive changes to the way taxi licensing works nationally and benefit our residents and our community.

Yours sincerely

Councillor Michael E Jones
Leader of the Council