

White paper

Transformation and digitisation for licensing services

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iTouchVision 

 myCouncilservices

Visit www.abavus.co.uk

Email info@abavus.co.uk

Call 020 8530 2505

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The challenges and opportunities of licensing services for local authorities

The effective execution of a local authority's mandated responsibilities relating to licensing services contain numerous challenges and opportunities. Licensing has an important role in ensuring compliance with required standards, covering everything from safe and secure housing provision through to effective oversight of licensed premises, community and commercial events, taxi licensing and many more areas of day to day modern life.

In many situations the effective checking of standards requires practical intervention in the form of a physical inspection and assessment. Moreover, in these fiscally challenged times licensing activities represent an opportunity for local authorities to responsibly and sustainably generate additional revenue. Alongside the opportunity to generate valuable income sits the responsibility of effective enforcement, in situations where individuals, companies or premises do not meet required standards or are not properly licensed.

The multiple threads of carrying out the council's licensing responsibilities are highly interdependent. Some of the key supporting factors include:

- Support and ensuring compliance with legally binding standards and conducting effective inspection where necessary, requires the local authority to offer clear explanation of the responsibilities of the licensee and the provision of accessible application procedures.
- In turn, accurate record keeping of the licenses in place must be maintained and a record of the inspections conducted along with the associated scores and outcomes must be in place.
- The council has to enable accurate and efficient collection of fees, the records of which will need to be clearly associated with the person, event or asset that is covered by the license.

Only with each of these elements present can the council be confident that it has strong governance in place for its range of licensing activities, associated revenue collection and that the downstream enforcement activities can be carried out with the required rigour.



Overview of our work with UK local authorities

Abavus works exclusively with UK local authorities, enabling them to achieve wide-ranging transformation of service delivery across the full range of council service functions. In recent years we have invested significantly in the development of the My Council Services digital platform to support processes that require application, inspection in the context of required standards, payment collection, automation of downstream workflow and enforcement.

In this white paper we examine how the My Council Services platform supports the following areas of licensing:

- Customer self-service – how councils can most efficiently enable customers to access the relevant application process and complete their application online using an internet connected device of their choosing
- Payment collection, financial reconciliation and license renewal – how councils streamline the process of license fee collection and license renewal whilst also maintaining accurate records on licenses held
- License management – enabling council officers, be they part of the licensing team or other regulatory teams to process those applications and to design and deploy automated workflow to support such processing where desirable and appropriate
- Mobile inspections – how councils can harness technology to support improved efficiency when executing premises inspections e.g. houses of multiple occupancy and other license based inspection processes
- Enforcement – With the key elements of license management and fee collection present, accurate and stable we will illustrate how councils can become more proactive in terms of enforcement and the benefits this will derive

The screenshot displays the 'My Council Services' interface. On the left is a navigation menu with options: Home, My information, My Council, Know my bin day, Report it, Pay For It, Book It, Apply for it (highlighted), and Change of circumstances. The main content area shows three application tiles: 'HMO License' (Apply for a House Of Multiple Occupancy license), 'Temporary Event Notice' (Apply for a temporary event license), and 'Personal License' (Apply for a personal license). Below these is a form titled 'HMO Application Form #179138 | Section 1 Ownership and Management - 1.1 Applicant Details'. The form includes fields for Title, First Name, Last Name, and Address. A blue callout box on the right states: 'Allow customers to apply for license with a range of accessible and responsive eforms. Providing guidance and support to help ensure the correct license and payment is made will save the Council time and money. It will also improve the customer experience'.

The screenshot shows the 'Store' interface for creating and managing forms. A blue arrow points from the 'Apply for it' menu item to the 'Forms Builder' section. The 'Forms Builder' section has tabs for Rules, Status, Transitions, Priority, and Outcomes. Below these is a search bar with the text 'Search forms' and 'HMO'. A table lists available forms:

Client	Form
Attercliffe Borough Council	HMO Questionnaire (L)
Southend-on-Sea Borough Council	HMO Application Form
Southend-on-Sea Borough Council	HMO Application Form - Copy
Southend-on-Sea Borough Council	Request HMO Advice

A blue callout box above the table states: 'The My Council Services form store allows Councils to create and then share license forms. This means that new users can benefit from form templates already created and deployed by colleagues at other UK Local Authorities'.

Customer self-service for license applications

The My Council Services platform incorporates a dedicated and fully integrated e-form design module. This enables the entry point for customers requiring licenses of any purpose to make an application.

The process of designing suitable and accessible forms is relatively straightforward. In addition to the option of creating new eforms from scratch, the My Council Services Form Store allows one council to share and borrow existing form templates with one another. Whilst the specifics of the processes and the personnel that will manage and administer them can vary from one council to another, the detailed requirements of the form are very consistent.

A new UK local authority wishing to deploy license application forms need only to search, preview and import from the existing form templates in the platform's Form Store. Once created and tested, forms can be quickly published and deployed as an individual form as an integrated part of any web property (either requiring registration or not) and they can be made available as part of a fully functional customer portal.

Payment collection, financial reconciliation and license renewal

Integrated and secure online payment enables the council to fully streamline the process, ensuring that the appropriate license charge is collected and giving the council confidence that it has actually collected the correct fee for the relevant license period and that payment and licensee records are collated.

The My Council Services digital platform is routinely integrated with councils' preferred payment gateway providers to enable the online collection of fees as part of the self service process. Once integrated, the payment capability exists on the platform as a re-usable and configurable plug in. This means that once in place the same plug in can be used for multiple license application forms (and more widely for an other form type for that matter).

The screenshot shows the 'My Council Services' digital platform interface. On the left, a sidebar menu includes 'General', 'My Organisation', 'Templates', 'Plugin', and 'Integration'. The 'Plugin' section is highlighted with a blue arrow pointing to the 'Payment integration' tab. The 'Payment integration' tab is active, showing a table of payment gateways. A blue box with a white arrow points from the 'Plugin' section to the 'Payment integration' tab. A blue box with a white arrow points from the 'Payment integration' tab to the 'Payment gateway' table. A blue box with a white arrow points from the 'Payment gateway' table to the 'CAPITA CIVICA' logo.

Collecting, tracking and reconciling payment of licenses play a crucial role in effective management. My Council Services enables integrated online payments with the ability to track and reconcile all transactions as part of the license management process.

Edit	Payment gateway	Name	Description	Enabled
		Capita Payment Gateway		Yes
		CIVICA Payment Gateway		Yes
		WorldPay Payment Gateway		Yes
		Barclaycard Payment Gateway	Barclaycard	Yes
		GoCardLess - Redirect flow	GoCardLess - Redirect flow	Yes

My Council Services also offers a Product Module. This allows a complete database of product assets to be configured and appended with meta data to support ongoing product management. Having discreet products, with associated pricing and other documented attributes means that multiline purchases (a single transaction that contains multiple different products) can be enabled. This also means that financial reconciliation is much more straightforward, allowing different product or license payments to be allocated to the appropriate cost code or department.

Another area that should be given early consideration is the support and education that the council provides to prospective licensees as part of the application process. The reality is that the array of licenses required and the range of different people and organisations that must apply for them is broad. Many applicants will be individuals that do not have any professional knowledge in the arena of licenses. It would be sensible for the council to think carefully about how it provides advice, guidance and offers the required support to applicants.

In our experience it is more efficient to invest some time and effort in ensuring that an applicant makes the correct application

for the correct license type and pays the correct amount the first time through the process. Working with frustrated applicants after the event to correct mistakes or to complete a refund will quickly leech away at your council's efficiency gains created through having a digital process.

There is no single right or wrong answer to this challenge but it is important to provide accessible information and access to informed and accurate advice as part of the applications process. This could take the form of clearly written web pages with links to the relevant online application forms and in some cases it may make sense to allow access to a member of staff who has expert licensing knowledge. As part of this exercise it would be sensible for the council's Licensing Team to think about and segment its applicant audience. Some applicants will be one time only members of the public whilst others may be 'professional' serial applicants working for an organisation for whom license application is part of their day to day operations. Adapting the channels of support to reflect these different applicant profiles will produce a better outcome all round.

License management

Because of the relatively wide range of license types that a council is responsible for issuing and managing, it is crucial that the council sets itself up to manage the full array in the most effective means possible. This importance of carefully analysing the different license processes is amplified when taking steps towards making these process more or entirely digital from application through to issue and renewal. Simply rolling an offline, paper-based process into a digital format is not going to deliver the anticipated improvements in efficiency.

Different license types present different challenges and opportunities. The specific characteristics of the council will also have a significant influence. For example, a larger council covering a densely populated urban area is likely to have high volumes of HMO license applications. We have spoken to large urban councils recently that are dealing with well in excess of 5,000 HMO applications annually. This is a significant workload. When you dig into the detail the complexities are numerous. Renewing and inspecting can be a major overhead. Getting things wrong can have multi-faceted implications and negative impacts, including but not limited to:

- Exposing tenants of HMOs to unacceptable risks
- Significant reputational damage to the council when some incident inevitably occurs
- Missed revenue opportunity because of poor underlying data and record keeping
- A failure to properly regulate a housing and accommodation type that may be more heavily relied upon by more vulnerable individuals
- Allowing rogue landlords to dodge their responsibilities and avoid proper licensing

The answer to mitigating and minimising these risks lies in having a fully integrated process going right from start to finish. This will include:

- Application receipt from would be licensee
- Calculation and collection of payment
- Review and assessment of the application
- Inspections (if required)
- Award of license or refusal of license with advice back to the licensee on how to achieve compliance
- Maintenance of license and payment records clearly related to the property, asset or individual concerned
- Interim monitoring and enforcement, based on changing legislation and or changing circumstances
- Effective means for management of the renewal process

Comprehensive reporting on current applications and cases is available via the Service Desk, case management interface. Users can select their preferred view and drill down to individual application detail quickly and easily.

Number	Form	Date	Status	Impact	Service	Priority	Customer	Owner	Location
178512	HMO Application Form	29 Jan 20 15:36	Open	-	-	-	Mr. Gary Wilcox	Berni Simmons	100 Grove Hill, London, E18 2HZ, UK
178405	HMO Application Form	28 Jan 20 17:17	Open	-	-	-	Mr. Graham Wilcox	Berni Simmons	Flat 17, 1 Ullswater Court, Glebelands Avenue, London, E18 2BD, UK
178401	HMO Application Form	28 Jan 20 16:31	Open	-	-	-	Mrs. Vanessa Wilcox	Berni Simmons	98 Bressay Grove, London, E18 2HX, UK
178395	HMO Application Form	28 Jan 20 15:16	Open	-	-	-	Mr. Gary Wilcox	Berni Simmons	100 Grove Hill, London, E18 2HZ, UK
178392	Temporary Event Notice	28 Jan 20 15:06	Open	-	-	-	Mr. Gary Wilcox	-	9 Ground Floor The Shrubberies, South Woodford, London, E18 1BD, UK

Enabling mobile inspections and remote working

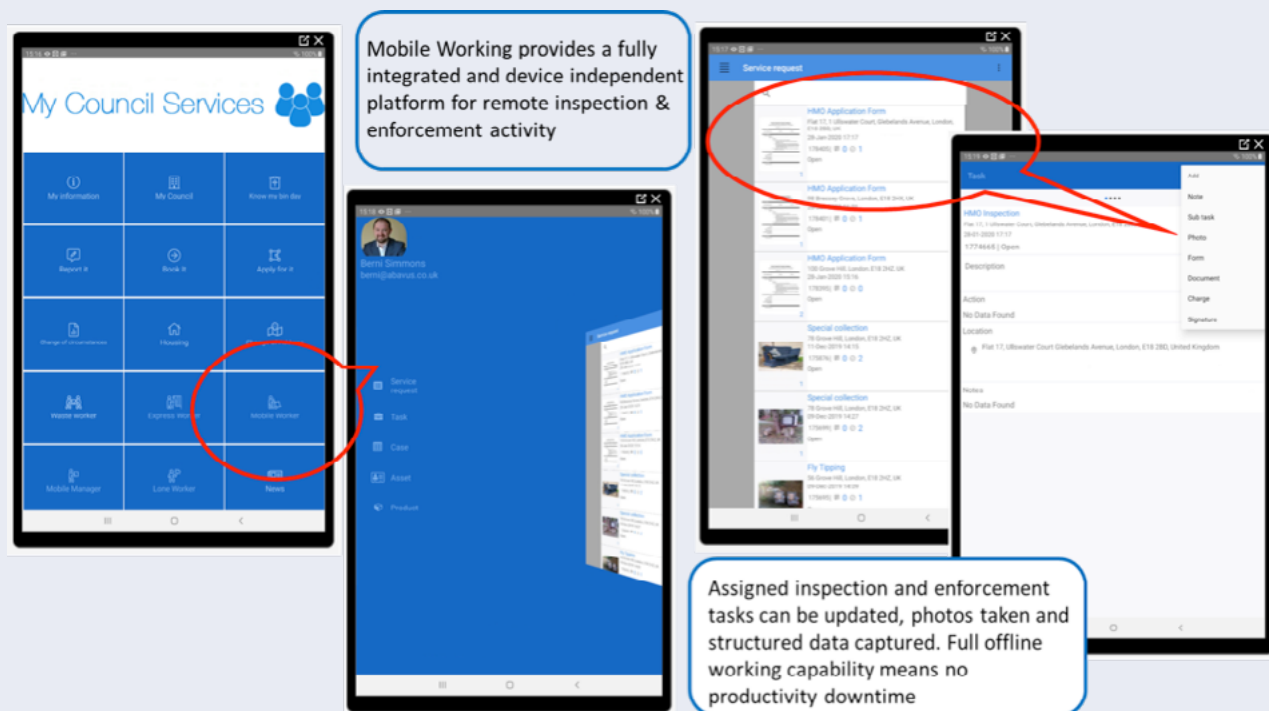
Many license process have a requirement for the council to conduct some form of inspection. That could be of a property or premises, an asset of some description or to inspect and evaluate a process or service being carried out by an individual or a business.

In many cases this will require a council officer to visit a location that is not a council office such as a property or business. Once on site a structured process of inspection, assessment and data capture needs to be completed. In some cases the assessment data captured will be used to calculate a score, often such a derived score is based on a specific and pre-defined calculation.

In this context it is most efficient to be able to equip the council's representative with a mobile device on which all the relevant initial application data is available and from which the inspector can use structured 'task forms' to complete assessment related data capture. This type of capability removes the need for paper forms, it allows for the eradication of double keying of data (e.g. first manually captured on paper followed by data entry into a separate back office system). Once captured using a true mobile working application the assessment and inspection data is automatically and securely transferred to the fully integrated back office case management system. It is also important that the mobile working technology being used is device independent and that the whole infrastructure can be subject to your council's mobile device management protocols.

A further important consideration is offline working capability - enabling a mobile officer to access inspection data, add to it and save it, regardless of mobile carrier or wireless signal. This is generally best achieved through a locally installed native mobile app on the smartphone or tablet. Any locally held data must be securely encrypted and should be wiped once a task or inspection is complete and successfully synchronised to the back office. The native mobile application approach that is used by My Council Services has numerous benefits over browser based approaches, specifically:

- The ability to securely encrypt locally held data and manage its removal as part of the workflow once it is no longer required
- Offering better overall security than other approaches e.g. avoiding the potential security risks associated with caching data in browsers on local devices
- Perhaps most importantly the ability to enable true offline working meaning that your remote officers can remain productive regardless of carrier signal or Wi Fi availability



Enforcement based on accurate license status, payment data and reporting

Enforcement activity in relation to license management for local authorities in the UK is really only possible with sound and accurate underlying data. That data must include the following details to enable effective and sustainable enforcement:

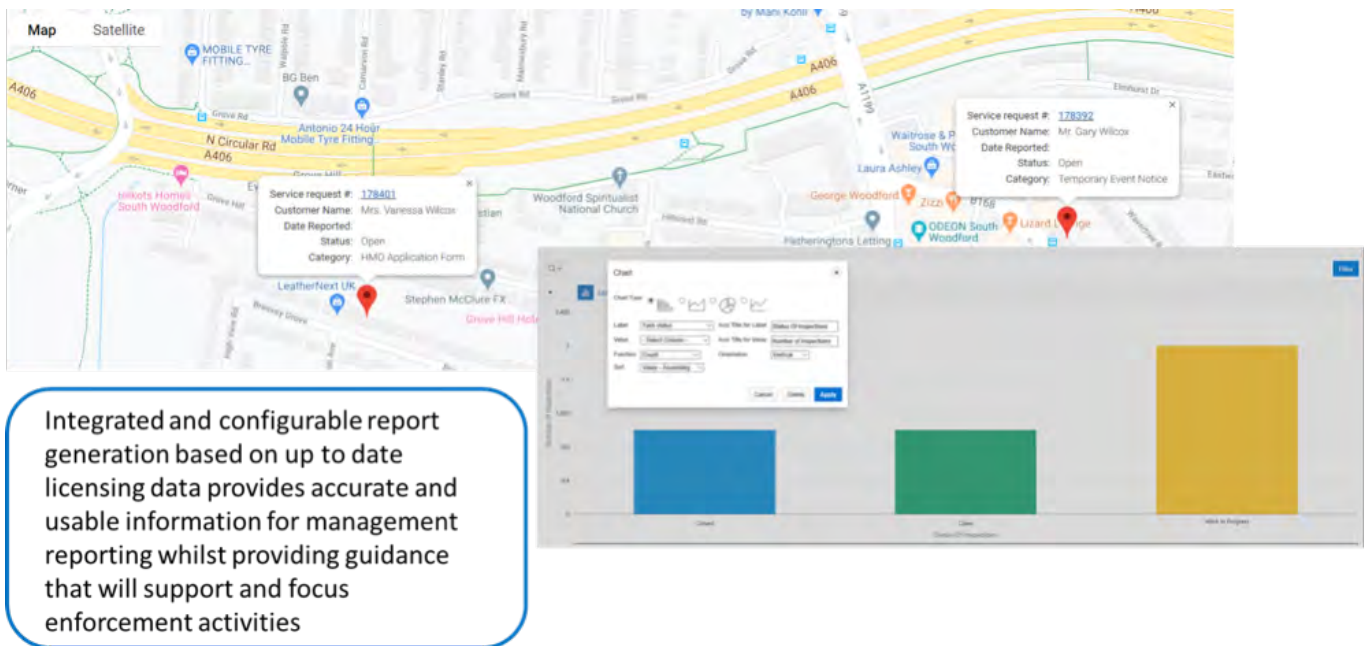
1. Accurate records of which individuals or organisations holds which type of license
2. Up to date records of the payments made and to which individuals, premises, assets or permissions these relate
3. To add additional focus and intelligence to the planning and execution of enforcement activity historical data on non compliance and license contravention would also be beneficial

Abavus contends that data items 1 and 2 on the above list are absolute pre-requisites. Item 3 is a valuable addition.

The sharp end of enforcement activity itself can also be enabled through the use of mobile working technology as described in the previous section, allowing officers to work remotely whilst maintaining access to license and payment records.

Enforcement of course is closely connected with effective license renewal. Having accurate historical data and payment information puts the council in a much more informed position of governance when issuing renewal notices (where this is relevant) and collecting payment where required.

A practical aid to effective oversight and management of the full range of licensing processes is the ability to analyse the up to date license data and for users to be able to run detailed reporting against this. My Council Services provides the council with a range of integrated options in terms of reporting. From realtime reporting on inbound applications through to detailed reporting on license and payment status by license type and license holder details; the council will have the ability to quickly and easily configure reports that summarise and list the required detail to support effective management and enforcement.



In addition to internal reporting capabilities on the My Council Services platform, there is also an API available allowing the council to connect data to an external business intelligence product such as Power BI.

Overall, effective enforcement will improve rates of fee collection and it will reduce the potential risk associated with unlicensed or poorly regulated activities, both outcomes are positive for the council and at the same time support local communities enabling them to thrive and flourish with appropriate license safeguards in place.



About Abavus

Abavus is an established UK-based technology and service provider to the UK public sector. Since 2007 we have been delivering software solutions and consultancy services that underpin and enable transformation and efficiency programmes in local authorities.

At Abavus we work extremely closely with one innovative, independent software house – iTouch Vision – who develop the widely used My Council Services enterprise platform. Abavus and iTouch Vision have entered into a long-term partnership agreement, whereby Abavus implements and supports My Council Services exclusively in the UK public sector.

This allows iTouch Vision to invest the maximum resource in its continued research and development activities, whilst Abavus focuses on the delivery and support of the solutions to clients.

Abavus has a customer base of over 50 UK local authorities and government organisations using the My Council Services solutions, as well as a small number of private clients. We are firmly established in the public sector market as a leading provider of innovative, cost-effective information technology solutions, helping public and third sector organisations to save money and make significant efficiency gains.

Abavus has been successfully delivering technology-enabled transformation projects in the testing operating environment that has prevailed following the financial crash of 2007 and the unyielding constraint on funding that this has created. Whilst this has been challenging it has meant we have to keep our projects focused on value and delivery. Our responsive, customer-focused approach has enabled us to thrive in a busy marketplace.

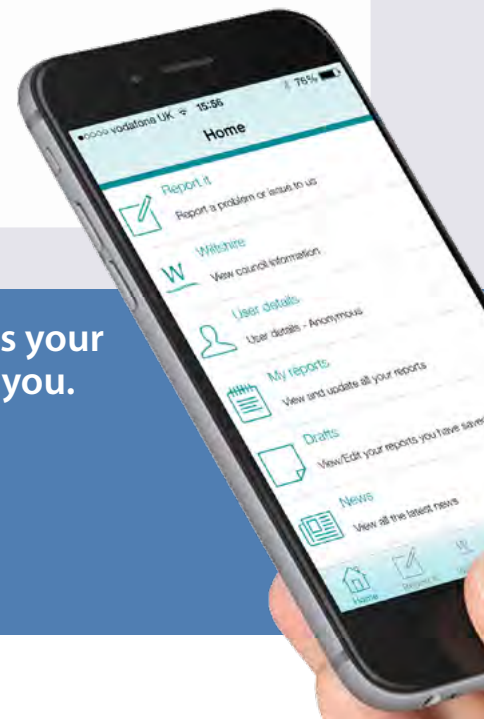
Consultancy and training

Abavus also provides consulting and training services to ensure that our clients are up and running with the technology solutions we provide as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Drawing upon our extensive knowledge and understanding of public sector organisations and the specialist technical skills within the team, Abavus leads and supports consultancy and training engagements with the focus on driving business transformation and change.



myCouncilservices



Please feel free to contact us to discuss your requirements. We'd love to hear from you.

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