Taxi Licensing ‘manage my licence’: discovery report

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Table of Contents

Project Approach

This discovery stage is part of the Licensing Services New Ways of Working project. It aims to understand our taxi licensing users' needs and produce recommendations for any future service development. Discovery is an iterative process in which finding answers also uncovers new questions and new areas of research. When the project moves beyond the initial discovery phase, ongoing user research work will ensure we continue to understand and meet user needs. This research stage was to be completed over nine weeks from mid-October to December.

Research Planning

Research team

This research was conducted by and in collaboration with:

Operational services	Customer Services	Digital	OD / People Team
Shelley Bowman James Knight Aimee Vosser Wendy Harden Joanne O'Connell	Marybeth Quaintmere	Alex Shiell Alex Stone Daisy Ebude Phil Roberts	Sarah Barron

Research objectives

The team developed a research plan with the following objectives:

- Understand user needs for a new service enabling users to 'manage my taxi license, available online, over the phone or onsite'
- Check any assumptions about the service or users that we wish to test
- Answer any questions needed before starting work to deliver this service

Research assumptions and questions

The team developed a research plan to explore the core assumption that an improved 'Manage my taxi license' digital service would be desirable to users, meet user needs and deliver value for users and the Service. To explore this the Licensing team identified an initial set of research questions as follows:

- What do/don't users want from this?
- What information do users need access to?
- What form of notification / prompting works for us and our users?
- Do users want an account?
- What do we/users consider 'managing' as opposed to apply/renew a license?
- What technology do users prefer and use now?
- What would be the impact on those who might not use this?
- What has been the experience of recently added digital tools?

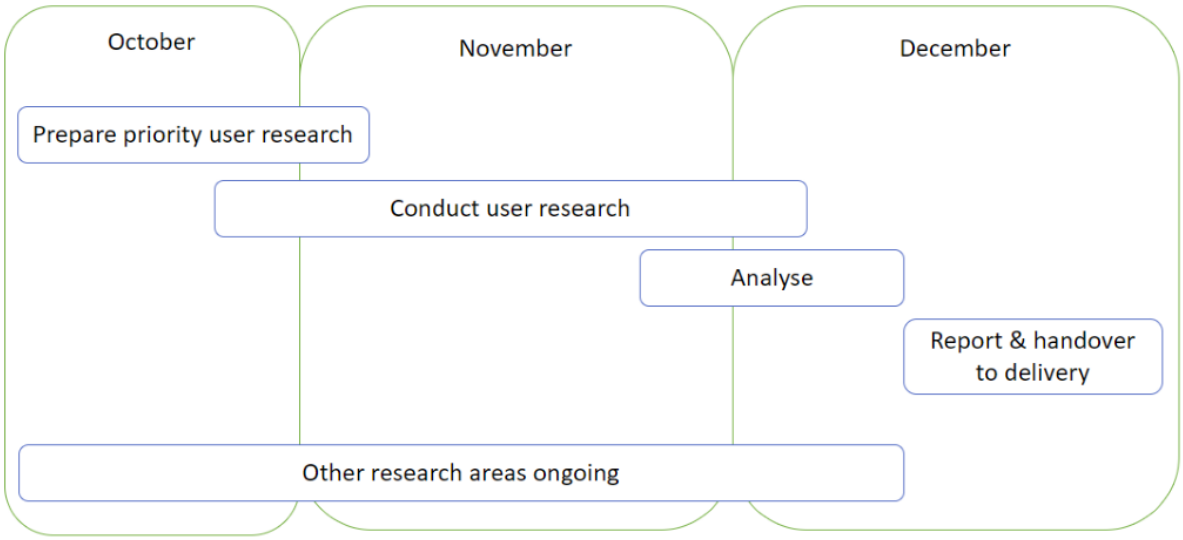
Research activities

The team identified and prioritised research methods and participants (see appendix I). Research comprised of the following:

- **Rank visits:** In order to speak with hackney carriage and private hire drivers, rank visits were identified as a priority form of user research; however due to lockdown requirements over November, ranks visits were confined to a brief period in early December.

- **Survey:** A survey was circulated to licence holders and operators, accepting responses from early November.
- **Workshops:** Licence holders, trade groups and operators were invited to join a series of workshops over the period. Each session's format was identical to enable structured, comparable format of output.
- **Staff workshop and desk research**: The team and other internal stakeholders were involved in workshops and desk-based research discussions. These sessions primarily explored what did or didn't work well in the course of supporting licence holders.
- **Legacy data**: In line with the discovery's scope, review of data held in the licencing system was focused on the purpose and frequency of contact with licence holders. This data was identified in the form of case notes detailing interactions with licence holders, referred to as 'IVAs# by the team (Investigations, Visits and Actions). This data was limited to IVA records created in the period inclusive of 2017 to 2020.

High level research schedule



Notes on research participation

- The team were keen that this initial research stage achieve a representative level of participation and felt that would mean engagement with 70 to 80 service users. This should primarily be drivers but also recognising operator and vehicle owner roles that often overlapped.
- Rank visits were recognised as the research method likely to achieve the most engagement. The November 1st lockdown unfortunately coincided with planned rank visits, delaying them and limiting this work to a short post-lockdown window in early December.
- Overall, this research has recorded engagement with service user numbers within the proposed 'representative' range. Some ad-hoc feedback was received in via conversations and emails but in terms of the primary research methods, figures are as follows:
    - 55 responses captured via a survey promoted with all service users
    - 14 responses captured via survey captured in-person or over the phone
    - 6 participants via workshops, including representatives from major local operators.

Notes on data discovery

- IVAs (case notes) are manually created when deemed necessary by Licensing Officers and therefore do not provide a complete picture of contact between the Licensing team and Licence holders. Furthermore, these numbers may be influenced not just by demand (contact resulting in IVAs) by the availability of Licensing Officers (supply – their ability to create these records).
- IVA meta-data was found to be insufficient to explore contact to the extent where contact around all specific activities within scope could be identified. This detail is likely contained within the IVA text fields. These do not conform to any fixed patterns of data content that would allow accurate analysis at scale (I.e., without manually reviewing the content of each field). For example, identifying all IVA's relating to updating of insurance documents would not be reliable by simply searching for references to 'updating' and 'insurance' and this activity is not identified in other IVA meta-data. This detail has not been prioritised in this discovery phase but could be explored in future as needed.
- The vast majority (94%) of IVA records related to just three IVA types: 'First Contact', 'Licensing - No Visit Required' and 'No visit'. This reflects the previous point as to what this level of meta-data can tell us of the specific issues these concerned.

Findings

Finding: Over half (51%) of drivers said they 'would do' all licence tasks online.

Of survey respondents identifying as either hackney carriage or private hire drivers, 26 of 51 said they would do all of the listed in-licence tasks online if this was made possible. Just two drivers said they 'wouldn't do' any of the tasks online, both saying they preferred to sort out other ongoing arrangements in person.

Finding: More drivers said they were 'not sure' about doing tasks online than said they 'would not' do tasks online.

Where drivers did not say that they 'would do' a task online, 60% said they were 'not sure' as opposed to 40% who said they 'would not' do the tasks online. The source of this uncertainty is not certain but possible explanations given in other feedback include not needing to do the tasks at all and unfamiliarity with how it would work and/or the technology involved. This is illustrated by fig. 1 below.

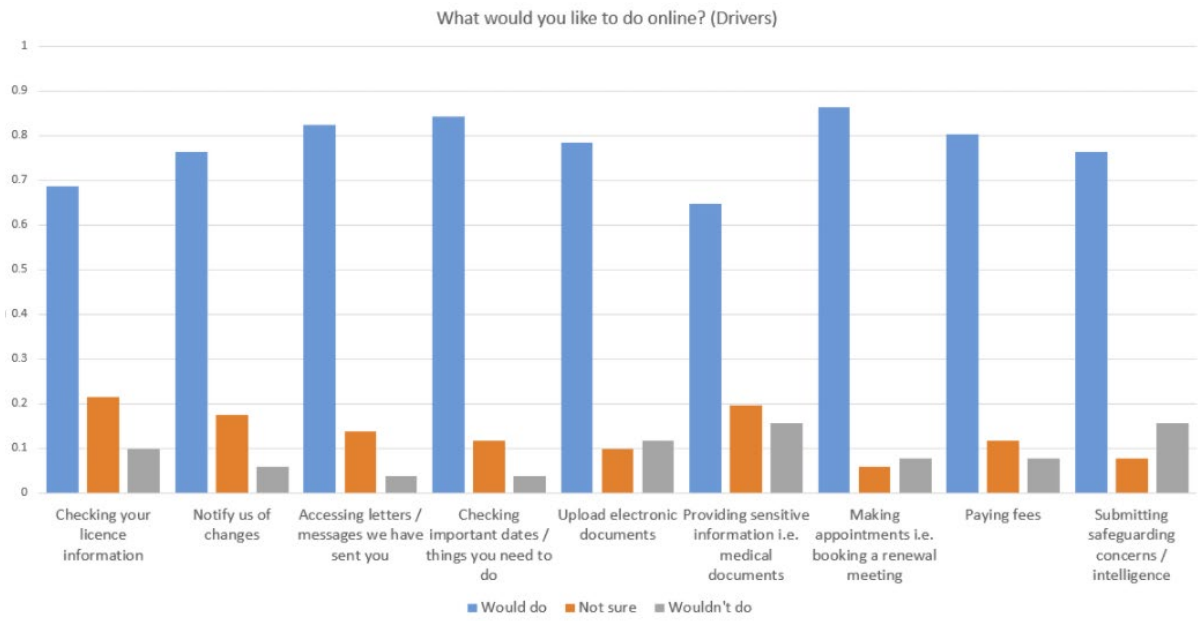


Fig 1 – Driver survey responses regarding online tasks

Finding: Driver technical ability and confidence are expected to be key challenges for uptake of an online service.

All stakeholders, including drivers, highlighted this as an issue. It is likely that responses to the online research survey came from a more technically confident and able audience. Responses were received however from drivers who preferred to engage in-person and from drivers reporting their own lack of confidence and familiarity with online services. Three drivers specifically mentioned their concerns about being unfamiliar with online services yet predominately expressed willing or uncertainty about use of an online licence service, rather than saying they wouldn't use it at all.

This finding also underlines the importance of providing support to drivers to enable them to use an online service but also to ensure non-digital users have parity of service with some form of mediated service via the channels that they rely on.

Finding: Current contact with the licensing service appears out-of-step with comparable ongoing services drivers use.

Over three quarters of surveyed service users currently choose to contact the licensing team via phone. In other dealings however, less than a quarter reported the phone as their preferred method of contact for sorting out other ongoing arrangements. The leading preference was to do things online with nearly a third choosing this option. Over half reported 'always' going online to check information and only one said they 'never' accessed an online government service. Just over a quarter favoured email and less than one in ten expressed preferences for the 'app' and 'in-person' options.

Finding: Greater use of push notifications widely viewed as means to improve communication and timely action.

There was widespread support for increased use of automated notifications and prompts to reduce manual forms of this activity and improve driver awareness of key actions and dates. This format

was considered well suited to the nature of driver work which naturally involves a lot of working time mobile and in the field with frequent interruptions. Lack of awareness of impending deadlines or outstanding action was a major issue and notification were seen as an easy-to-use/understand route to improving awareness. The advantages of specific notification formats or regimes were not researched but feedback suggested different formats (email, SMS, social media) would work for different drivers.

Finding: Some division on Social media usage

20% of drivers said they 'never' made use of social media. This did not reflect any grouping on licence type and device use or attitudes to current and potential online service use; even the two respondents who expressed no interest in using an online licensing service made use of social media. It appears very much to be a purely personal preference that a significant group of those sampled do not partake in.

Finding: The licensing tasks consulted on are generally considered easy, 'paying fees' especially.

Across those tasks surveyed, all received an 'easy' rating in from at least two-thirds (66%) of respondents (excluding those who answered that they never need to do those tasks). All tasks received 'could be better' ratings from between 10% and 15% of respondents. Paying fees stood out as a task that no-one assessed as 'not at all easy' and just three respondents felt it 'could be better'.

Finding: Online tasks involving sensitive information linked to lower confidence but reasons for this vary.

The potential online tasks of 'providing sensitive information...' and 'submitting safeguarding concerns / intelligence' received the lowest proportions of 'would do' ratings in the survey. There are perhaps obvious reasons to expect this, but research participants suggested varying reasons including medical files being too large to share online, security concerns, desire to conduct tasks in-person and desire to deal with a specific officer. Indeed 'checking your licence information' online was close to both these tasks in the ratings; this in part may be because both the 'safeguarding/intelligence' task and 'checking information' were the two tasks over 18% of participants 'never' needed to do.

Finding: An online service is in-keeping with Operator expectations for where the business is headed and how drivers could be expected to operate.

Operators felt that an online service or portal, enabling licence holders self-service access to progress their licence, access information and communicate with licencing officers, was neither novel nor an unreasonable mode of operation for drivers. Operators felt this was in keeping with the contemporary approaches to taxi service operations and it was right to expect drivers to engage with such platforms in the normal course of work.

Finding: Private hire and hackney carriage drivers showed no significant differences in their approach to contacting us or in their attitudes to using an online service.

We saw no significant differing trends between drivers in terms of how and how often drivers contact us, their feelings on what is easy to do or working well now or their attitudes to using online

services, including of licencing tasks. One notable observation was that only five drivers reported a preference for using a tablet to go online and all were hackney carriage drivers; we do not know if there is a significant reason for this.

Finding: Ease-of-use and efficiency of the service are priorities for operators and an online portal style solution was expected to improve both aspects.

Operator discussions and prioritization focused on getting drivers through the processes as efficiently as possible. Key to this was ensuring the drivers found the process easy to navigate and use, thereby avoiding errors, and that officer processes be consistent and efficient to minimise delays. Operators suggested that many of the specific obstacles to easy-of-use and efficiency could be overcome by providing some form of self-service online portal; replacing the handling of paperwork with digital documents in virtual drives was a frequently cited benefit of this approach.

Finding: Operators are willing to support drivers and would like access to clear, relevant information about the drivers, the licence process and licence progress.

Operators would like more access to driver information for a range of reasons. Foremost was a desire for transparency of licence progress information, to understand where drivers were in the process and the next steps. The many parties involved in the process who each might be a source of progress information made things less clear.

Operators suggested they and drivers would collaborate owing to mutual interests. Information sharing can therefore expect mutual support and would help in areas such as driver onboarding and retention. Not all situations, however, involve mutual interest. Operators stated they would like to know more about a driver, but what, why and with what possible implications have not been explored in this research. Licensing officers noted that sharing of changes in driver/operator relationships are often poorly reported. It can be expected that in some circumstances, driver preference may be to deny sharing of information.

Finding: Drivers and operators can be uncertain of licensing processes and rules with impacts on communication and efficiency.

Operators and drivers noted that uncertainty of the process can lead to miscommunication, misunderstandings and delays. This could also give rise to drivers fearing they might lose their licence and so engaging less with both operators and licensing officers. There was desire for access to clear licence process guidance with a particular a focus on the drivers progress through the process and key action dates and deadlines. Some form, if possible, of validation giving immediate positive or negative feedback was desired to help drivers understand if they had completed a step or action rather than wrongly assuming they had.

Finding: The cost and complexity of new driver licensing / on-boarding is a barrier to entry for the business.

Operators recognised that the significant cost of entry (estimated at £450 to £500) made recruitment harder for businesses. The three-year licence is a significant investment and commitment, though the availability of one-year licences was highly valued in this context. Anything that could reduce the investment required in time and money would be important to the trade.

Finding: Licensing authorities might be better joined up.

Operators noted that drivers moving between licensing authorities had to largely start the licensing process from scratch, which seemed counterintuitive and inefficient; more so as a not insignificant amount of licenced taxi operations occur outside the geographic licensing authority area. This situation was further complicated where multiple medical providers and authorities need share access to notes. This issue closely relates to the 'barriers to entry' finding.

Finding: Operators, drivers and staff would benefit from escalation of impending/outstanding deadlines.

The officer side of the work to monitor and manage licence tasks and schedules requires significant resources. Tracking of progress and the efficiency and efficacy of this are priorities for all stakeholders and identified by staff as an area ripe for improvement. Improvements in this area are notably underway with the review of the software application used for Licensing (Uniform/iDox).

Finding: Service users pleased with Licensing team performance.

Overall service users reported a good deal of satisfaction with the service and team. Research data clearly indicates most users have positive experiences dealing with the team, finding tasks easy and support from individual officers readily available. This was not a particular focus of the research but emerged in feedback volunteered by participants. Feedback critical of team performance was limited to suggestions of occasions where unavailability of individuals led to delays and where officers gave conflicting information.

Finding: Electronic records systems do not currently provide sufficient meta-data for analysis of specific drivers of license holder contact.

As stated in the 'notes on data discovery' the current case record system's meta-data does not capture detail of the specific licensing activities/tasks that licence holders undertake in a format suitable for reporting. Understanding at present of the demand for these activities comes in the experience of Licensing Officers. An objective dataset for demand of these activities is unavailable at this time and this would remain the case under current record keeping systems. A further potential weakness in creating this meta-data set is reliance on manual creation of the data.

Finding: IVA data suggests no particular trend for overall contact volumes over the 2017-2020 period.

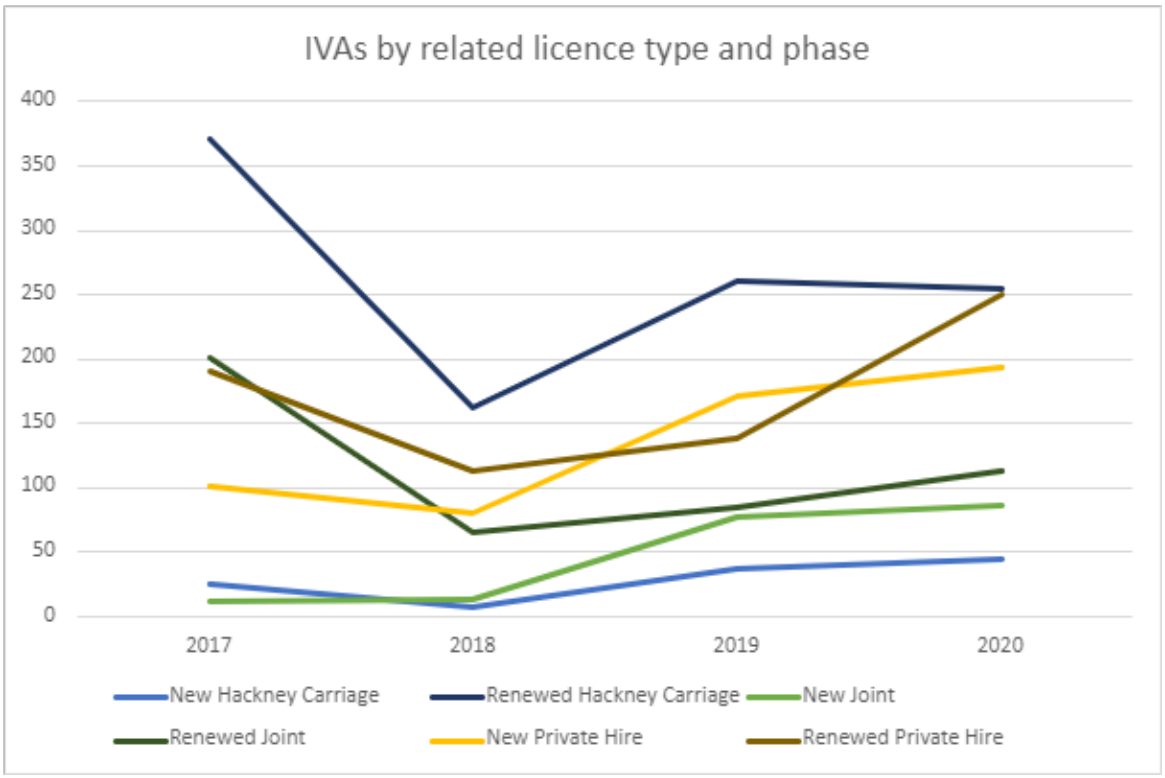
The data shows similar levels of IVA creation in 2017, 2019 and 2020. 2018 showed a significant decrease, the reasons for which have not been investigated. Overall, however, this data set does not suggest any trend towards increasing or decreasing contact between the Licensing team and Licence holders as a whole (see Appendix II).

Finding: IVA data shows a shift in volumes from Hackney Carriage to Private Hire over the 2017-2020 period.

There is a clear increase in IVA generation relating to new and renewed private hire licences coinciding with a decrease in IVAs associated with new and renewed hackney carriage licences over the period. Contrasting figures from 2017 and 2020 we see hackney carriage related IVAs decrease

by a quarter (24%) and while private hire increase by half (53%). 2020 itself sees near identical IVA numbers for both the hackney carriage and private hire licence holder groups.

New and renewed joint licenses also increase but to a less significant extent (6%); this group however contained a data anomaly with one joint licence holder record associated with 160 IVAs which deformed the 2017 sample.



Finding: IVA data shows some licence cases involve significantly higher IVA numbers than others.

Over the 2017-2020 period, 50% of IVAs related to just 20% of licence records. 29% of associated cases were associated 4 or fewer IVAs with 4 being the median number of IVAs of the dataset and 5 being the average. Two-thirds (67%) of cases related to 10 IVAs or less. This distribution can be seen in Appendix III.

Recommendations / conclusions

Assumptions underpinning 'Manage my taxi license' digital service are sound

This research aimed to explore the assumption that an improved 'Manage my taxi license' digital service would be desirable to users, meet user needs and deliver value for users and the Service. The findings of this research suggest that this assumption is sound; that an online facility is desirable to drivers and expected in the trade; that it would help to address licensing service user needs and improve the service experience.

Quantifiable measures of value in terms of efficiency or savings are not an objective of this research but the research suggests such efficiencies will be a consequence of digital service improvements. Officers felt that the digitisation/automation of notifications, recording of contact and general chasing of drivers for information would save significant time that might otherwise be dedicated to necessarily manual forms of support that add value for drivers. Furthermore, separate but parallel research on technology/system capabilities suggests the improvements discussed are achievable and realistic.

Priority of online service tasks and features

The research explored a range of licensing service tasks / activities that could potentially be offered online. The findings relating to driver attitudes, technological confidence and perceived value suggest any initial digital service carefully consider what tasks are first made available. Similarly, what features are required to support those tasks may vary when dealing with specific functional needs such as handling of sensitive information, sharing of documents, user authentication and the involvement of 3rd parties. It is recommended that such features be prioritised and that preserving the simplicity of the solution be a consideration in that prioritisation. Simply put: a simple initial offering may be preferred by users to a complex but feature rich option.

Notification approach, technology and user preferences

Keeping track of required actions over the life of a licence was an issue recognised by all stakeholders. Reminders and notifications were widely suggested as a potential solution. These notifications could come through various mediums such as email, SMS and possibly even social media. User preferences suggest no one size fits all. It may then be beneficial to allow users to select the notification method and regime that suits them. The recommendation then that this feature might be investigated further with users as its effectiveness would appear to rely on the user's personal preferences.

Sharing of access to info between operators & drivers

Feedback from drivers and operators suggested both would benefit at times from the sharing of certain driver licensing information. On online service might achieve this where otherwise this sort of sharing might be impractical. The details of exactly what should or could be shared has not been identified in this research. A general focus on progress information was identified, to assist both parties understanding the driver's progression with licensing tasks. Timely updating of the relationships between drivers and operators was also identified as an issue that might be enhanced by an online service, and this would appear to fundamentally underpin any sharing arrangements.

This sharing would raise data privacy and consent issues and the recommendation then is to investigate what information might be shared, when and how and what requirements would this extend to the design of the digital service.

Direct contact with officers and in person meetings

Drivers valued being able to deal directly with a particular officer, either in person or via phone. This form of contact was particularly valued for queries requiring immediate response and absolute certainty. A small number of participants also expressed preference for Taxi Trade Board and traffic management meetings to be in person. The proposed digital service makes no suggestion of the removal of such contact, but it is recommended that the team consider what digital/online options might help to meet this need in the future.

Review online support and guidance content and related communications strategy

Operators and drivers alike expressed uncertainty with the licensing process and their desire to have a clear process and with clear guidance. Current guidance has not been objectively reviewed in this research. It is, however, clearly important to all stakeholders that users understand the requirement of the licensing process, the expectations upon them and the timescales involved. Better understanding is expected to reduce the number of phone queries, increase efficiency and improve the user experience. To that end, a review is recommended of online/website content and the wider communications approach around licence support and guidance.

Collaborating and coordinating with other local authorities

The taxi trade identified problems arising from local authority administrative boundaries where in the disconnect between licensing authorities creates barriers and costs for the trade. The administrative practice does not line up with the trade's operational practice as drivers often work across areas. It is recommended that investigations be made into the removal and/or mitigation of these issues. Information sharing and transfer of already started applications between councils clearly has

Further engagement

In closing its noted that many participants in the research welcomed the opportunity to engage and discuss the improvement of the service. There is then a pool of contacts from this research happy to help with any further research, proto-typing or evaluation work as the service develops.

Appendices

Appendix I | Research methods & prioritisation

Research area	Participants	Potential research method suitability				
		Work shop	Interview	Survey	Rank visit	Desk
Priority user research questions	Licensing officers / team Taxi drivers (license holders) License applicants Taxi operators Vehicle proprietor Customer Services	• • • •	• • • • •	 • • • •	 • • • •	• •* •* •* •* •
Changes to Customer Service involvement in service delivery	Licensing officers / team Customer Services / Customer Services Manager	• • •				• • •
Legal and data protection implications	Legal / Corporate Manager Information Governance Officer IT	• • •				• • •
Technology choice / Uniform system health check	Licensing officers / team IT					• •
Electronic license documentation	Licensing officers / team IT					• •

* Subject to pre-existing data / feedback / research

Appendix II | Rushmoor Borough Council 'manage my licence' survey results

1. Please tick any and all that describe you

More Details

Hackney carriage driver	36
Private hire driver	25
Private hire operator	5
Vehicle proprietor	7

2. How often do you contact us about your licence?

More Details | Insights

Once or twice a year	48
Every few months	7
Monthly	0
A few times a month	0
Weekly	0

3. How do you usually choose to contact us about your licence?

More Details | Insights

In person / at the offices	3
Phone	40
Email	12
In writing / by post	0

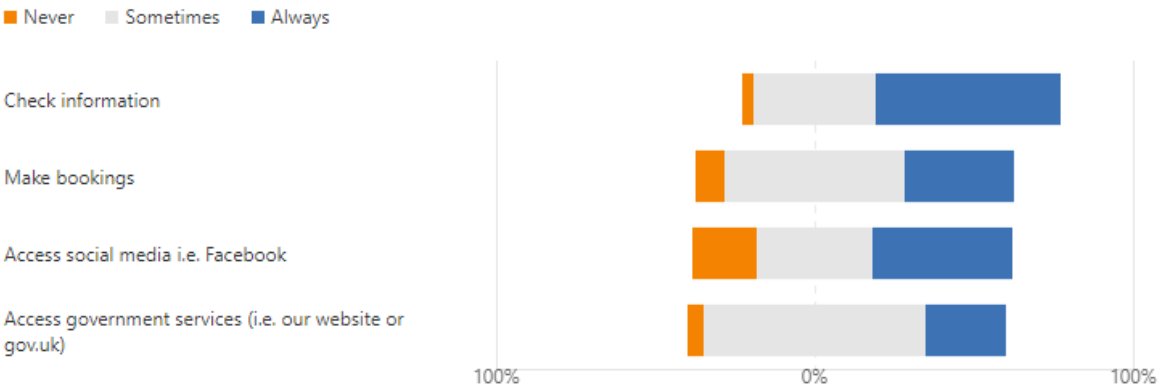
4. In life in general, how do you prefer to sort out other ongoing arrangements, such as utilities?

More Details

Phone	14
Email	17
App	3
Online	22
In person	2

5. How often do you do these things online?

More Details



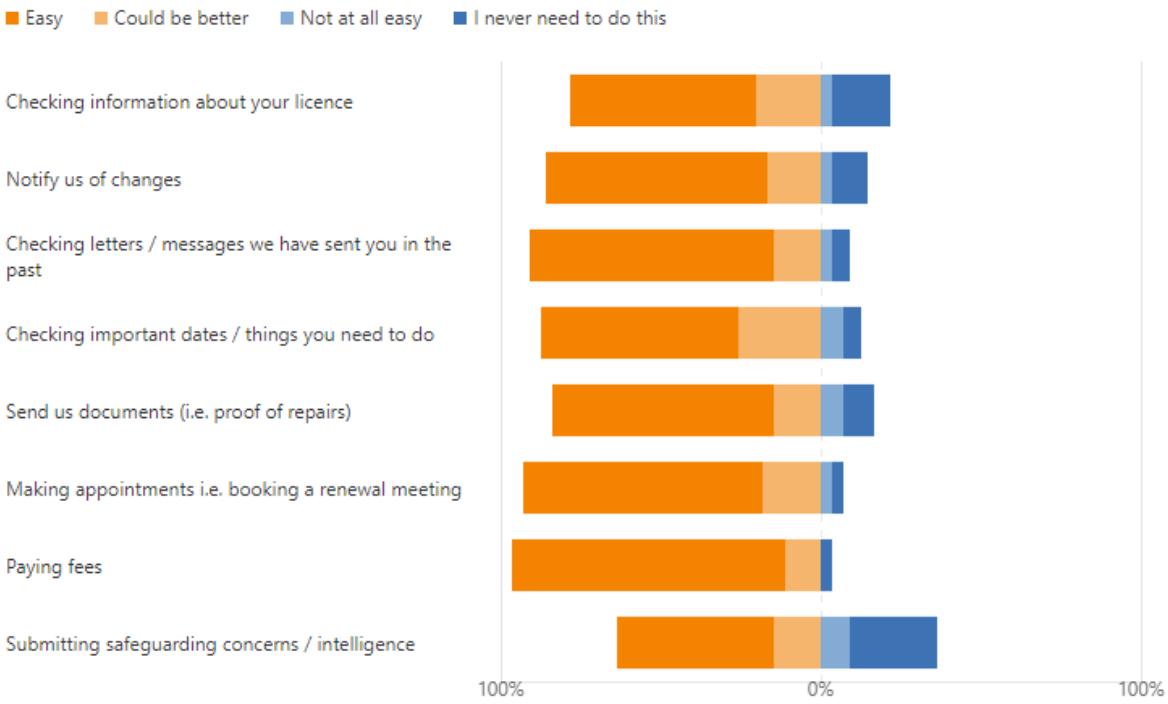
6. If you go online, what device do you usually use?

More Details | Insights

Mobile / smartphone	39
Tablet	5
Laptop / PC	11
Other	0

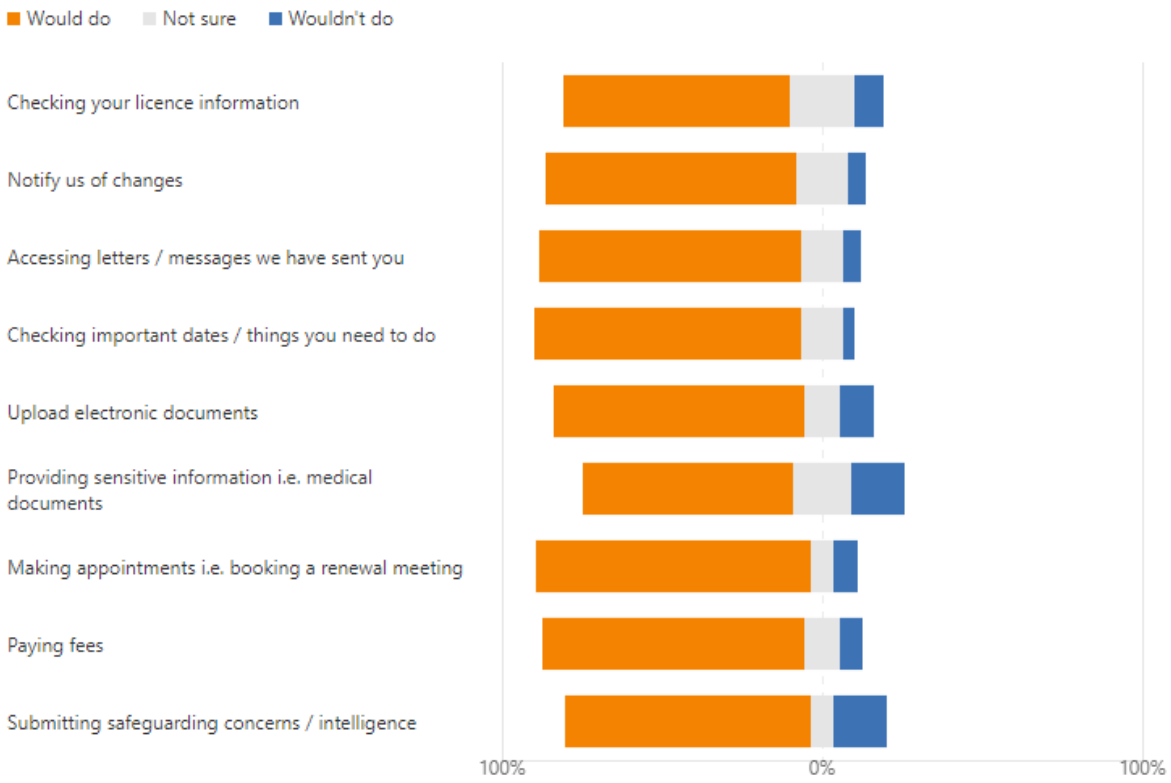
7. How easy do you find the following tasks at the moment?

More Details



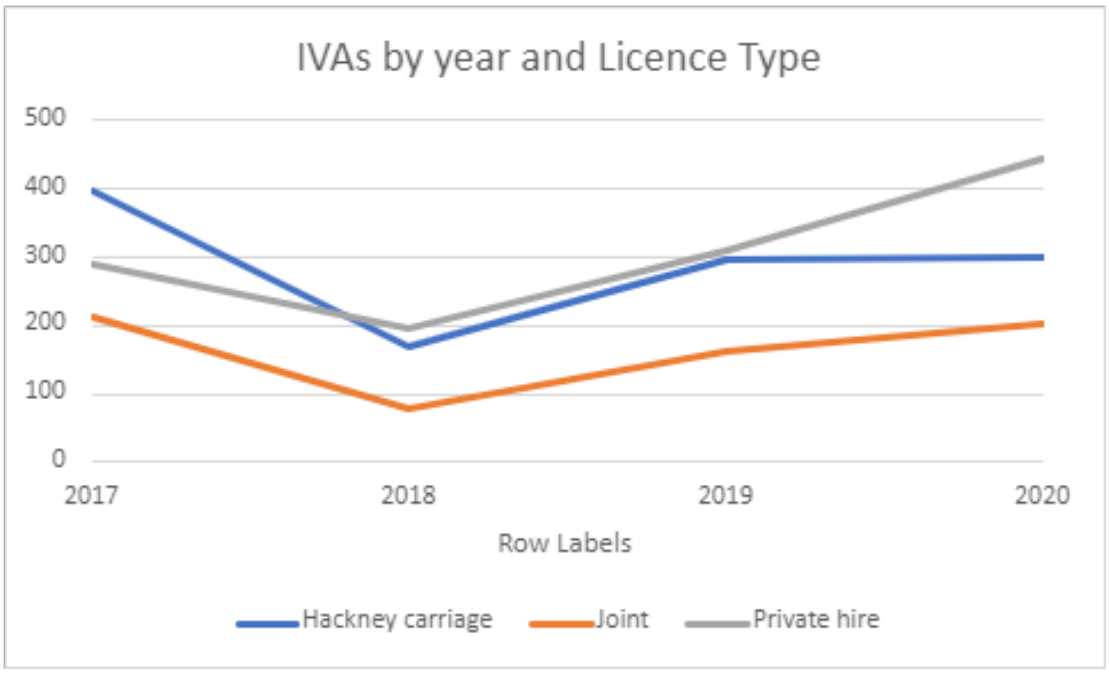
8. What sort of tasks would you like to be able to do online?

More Details

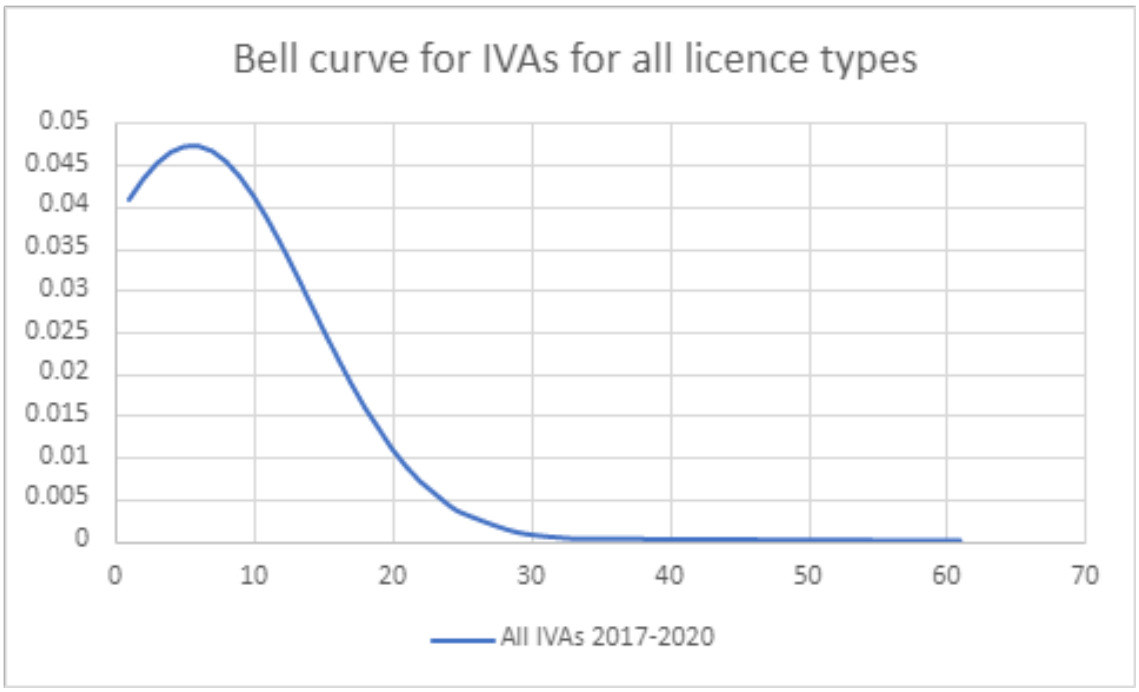


Appendix III | IVAs by year and licence type 2017-2020

	2017	2018	2019	2020
New Hackney Carriage	26	8	37	45
Renewed Hackney Carriage	371	162	261	255
New Joint	12	14	77	87
Renewed Joint	201	65	85	114
New Private Hire	101	81	172	193
Renewed Private Hire	190	114	138	251



Appendix IV | Bell curve showing typical IVA rates for all Licence types*



*Excludes 160 IVAs associated with one 'outlier' Joint licence record.