

Environmental Health and Rushmoor Borough Council

The Farnborough Society invited two of Rushmoor Borough Council's Environmental Health Managers came along to talk to us about their role in ensuring public safety; it was an evening that gave us plenty to think about.

Colin Alborough, whose responsibility is Food/Health & Safety, spoke first, explaining how his department reports to the Food Standards Agency, who dictates their role under the Food Law Code. While inspection and enforcement are central to his work, he was at pains to point out the importance of enabling good business. To this end, his team work closely with both new and existing businesses offering training, support and advice, something that local businesses really appreciate.

He said that RBC is proud to have been adopted as Primary Authority to the Army, so that wherever in the world food is served to service personnel, it will be under conditions laid down by RBC.

Another enormous responsibility for his team is the Farnborough International Air Show; there were 1500 exhibitors from 39 countries in 2012!

His department also works with bodies such as the NHS, the Health and Wellbeing Board and the new Clinical Commissioning Groups on issues such as infectious diseases, so that they can be effectively responsive to potential emergencies.

Reacting largely to residents' concerns, Colin's team receives around 550 requests for intervention each year. They utilise the Food Standards Rating System, which rates businesses from 0-5, and have the power to close down any business that presents a significant risk to safety. But closing down businesses is not the team's aim; it is to help those businesses that are failing to meet acceptable standards to improve to enable good business.

Colin showed a series of graphic photos of actual Rushmoor premises to convince us of the importance of investigating takeaways, pubs, cafes, sandwich shops, hotels, restaurants and food shops, including supermarkets, before eating their food. This information can be accessed via a link to the FSA from the Rushmoor Borough Council website, along with details of how to report problems: www.rushmoor.gov.uk

A smart-phone app is also available from FSA.

John McNab, whose responsibility is Licensing, took over to explain exactly what RBC licenses and why.

He began his presentation of this very complex subject by discussing gambling. As well as personal licenses for proprietors and managers, places such as clubs, bingo halls, betting shops, casinos and adult gaming centres require a premises license, and John explained the process by which they can apply. Even though strictly controlled by the Licensing Commission, each license will be different because different conditions will be attached to protect local residents from disturbance in that particular instance

Next, John talked about his responsibility for street trading, regulating markets, ice cream vans, charity collections and outdoor seating at cafes. He warned us that unscrupulous unlicensed individuals often deprive legitimate charities of donations, both of clothing and money. Of particular concern are the aggressive 'chuggers' who coerce pedestrians into signing direct debit forms in the street.

By far the most important aspect of John's work is the regulation of alcohol, live and recorded music, dancing, plays and other performances, takeaways, and late night refreshment. His aim is to prevent crime, disorder, and risk to people, especially children, and, as with gambling, licenses are granted to both individuals and premises. Currently, some 900 individuals hold personal licenses issued by RBC, though since they are portable, many holders no longer live in the borough.

In addition, Temporary Event Licenses can be issued. However, John mentioned some problems with the legislation, one being that only the police and the local authority's Environmental Health Department can lodge objections.

At the moment, indoor sports also require a license, though these will shortly be deregulated, except boxing and wrestling, where the risk makes licensing essential.

The final area of responsibility for John's team is the licensing of hackney carriages and private hire vehicles. RBC sets the fares, and spot checks are carried out regularly to ensure that vehicles are in good condition and well-maintained: unsafe vehicles are immediately taken out of service. Also, regulation of drivers provides the public with some protection from unscrupulous individuals.

Like Colin, John's primary focus is public safety. Problem gambling can lead to relationship breakdown, crime and gang activity. Drunkenness can cause noise disturbance and is often a factor in rape, injury, domestic violence and, of course, drunk-driving. Takeaways and late night refreshment establishments create litter and attract vermin. But, through its licensing, inspection and enforcement activities, the Environmental Health Department at RBC aims to mitigate any negative effects of our entertainment industry and keep us all safe.