

**Minutes of a meeting of the  
Licensing & Gambling Acts Casework Sub-  
Committee  
on Monday 12 January 2026**

**Committee members present:**

Councillor Miles (Chair)

Councillor Ottino

Councillor Upton

**Officers present for all or part of the meeting:**

Hannah Carmody-Brown, Committee and Member Services Officer

Richard Masters, Senior Licensing Compliance Officer

Tazafar Asghar, Legal Advisor

Priscellia Robinson, Observing Legal Advisor

**96. Election of Chair for the hearings**

Councillor Upton proposed Councillor Miles as Chair for the meeting;  
Councillor Ottino seconded.

Councillor Miles was elected as the Chair.

**97. Apologies for absence**

None.

**98. Declarations of Interest**

None.

**99. Procedure for the hearing**

The Sub-Committee noted the relevant procedure for the hearing.

## **100. Application to review a Premises Licence – Thirst, 7-8 Park End Street, Oxford, OX1 1HH**

The Chair invited the Sub-Committee, officers, and applicants to introduce themselves.

Russell Sharland, applicant, and Tobacco Control Officer from Oxfordshire County Council, Kayleigh Esposito, Trading Standards Officer, Rob Opher, the premises licence holder, and Craig Baylis, legal representative for the premises licence holder, were in attendance.

The Chair reminded all attendees that the meeting would be livestreamed publicly and provided a summary of the order of proceedings.

The Chair invited the Senior Licensing Compliance Officer to present the report.

The Senior Licensing Compliance Officer provided a comprehensive summary of the report, noting that the Sub-Committee meeting had been convened to determine an application submitted by Oxfordshire County Council Trading Standards for a review of the premises Licence in respect of Thirst, 7-8 Park End Street, Oxford.

Members understood that matters for consideration included:

- evidence that the licensed premises has been used to store and supply illegal tobacco products on three separate occasions
- the failure to display the statutory tobacco warning notice
- the promotion of shisha via social media

The Senior Licensing Compliance Officer emphasised that these matters were contrary to the Council's licensing objectives of protection of children from harm and prevention of crime and disorder.

Members understood that although a revocation should be strongly considered, Trading Standards had recommended that a period of suspension with additional recommended conditions be imposed instead. It was suggested this could act as a deterrent, promote the crime and disorder licensing objectives, protect the wider community.

The Senior Licensing Compliance Officer outlined the evidence and documents contained within the report.

The Sub-Committee were reminded of its responsibilities under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and the Human Rights Act, and of matters within the Home Office statutory guidance issued under section 182 of the Licensing Act 2003, and the Council's own Statement of Licensing Policy.

Members understood that they must select from the following determinations as it considers appropriate for the promotion of the licensing objectives:

- a) to modify the conditions of the licence.
- b) to exclude a licensable activity from the scope of the licence.
- c) to remove the designated premises supervisor.
- d) to suspend the licence for a period not exceeding three months.
- e) to revoke the licence.

The Chair invited Mr. Sharland to make any representations to the Sub-Committee.

Mr. Sharland comprehensively outlined the investigation conducted by Trading Standards at Oxfordshire County Council into the sale of shisha products at Thirst bar via a third-party operator. The presentation included a summary of the evidence, an explanation of water pipe tobacco products, and legislation and government guidance relating to the use of shisha on licensed premises. The Sub-Committee were referred to relevant sections of the report throughout this presentation.

Mr. Sharland also guided the Sub-Committee through details of events and correspondence recorded throughout the investigation, and the mitigation steps which have since been taken by Mr. Opher at Thirst bar.

The Sub-Committee heard a list of conditions which were recommended as additions to the premises licence for Thirst following the conclusion of this investigation.

The Chair thanked Mr. Sharland and invited questions from the Sub-Committee.

Councillor Ottino queried details relating to the social media posts which depicted the use of Shisha at Thirst. Mr. Sharland confirmed that the posts were made from Thirst's account rather than the shisha operator's and that they were brought to Mr. Opher's attention in September, and then under the license review. It was also confirmed that no action had yet been taken to remove these social media posts.

Councillor Upton queried the face-to-face interactions which the report noted in 2019 and 2020 and asked who the Trading Standards officers engaged with on these

occasions. Mr. Sharland explained that Trading Standards officers engaged with the operations manager of Spirit Bar Limited, and Mr. Shridi.

In relation to the report, the Chair noted that there was an informal arrangement between Mr. Opher and Mr. Shridi in relation to the provision of shisha products and services within Thirst. It was asked whether this was formally documented in any way, and whether the shisha company was formally registered. Mr. Sharland confirmed that the informal arrangement had organically developed and became more formalised in recent years due to increases in the insurance premium paid by Mr. Opher in connection to the provision of shisha. The Sub-Committee were also informed that the shisha operator did not operate as a limited company, and that Mr. Shridi had been evasive when interviewed in relation to his business and finances.

The Chair asked whether Mr. Shridi had ever clarified where he was procuring the shisha products from, to which Mr. Sharland explained that he had denied any instances of him selling and supplying tobacco. Instead, Mr. Shridi had claimed that the customers were bringing shisha into Thirst bar, and he only supplied the water pipes. Mr. Shridi had never accounted for the presence of the water pipe tobacco on the premises.

Councillor Ottino queried whether the shisha products could have contained illegal drugs and asked whether this had been checked during the investigation. Mr. Sharland clarified that this had not been investigated and confirmed they had no concrete evidence to suggest this was the case. The Sub-Committee, however, heard that no robust systems were in place to ensure the products were managed, and therefore it can also not be stated with confidence that no other products were being sold; this could have occurred on the premises without the management being aware.

Councillor Upton asked whether the recommendation of a short suspension, rather than revocation of the premises licence, would be sufficient as a deterrent, and whether there is history of this working in historic cases. Mr. Sharland explained that Trading Standards were not recommending a revocation of the premises licence as it is an on-licence premises, not off licence, meaning that a revocation would cause the business to cease to exist. The recommendation considers a proportionate balance of imposing a deterrent whilst also supporting thriving businesses in the area. Mr. Sharland also explained that Mr. Opher's commitment to rectifying the issues demonstrates a positive approach to ensuring no such issues arise at Thirst again.

Councillor Ottino queried what the implications of revocation would be for Thirst. It was confirmed that if revoked, the business could be sold to another individual who could then apply for a new premises licence.

Councillor Upton noted that the current managers' claim to be ignorant of tobacco regulations and asked whether this is common. Mr. Sharland explained that this would be hard to comment on as he could only speak based on businesses he has interacted

with, however, a national issue was noted in respect of non-compliance with shisha laws.

The Chair asked how frequently Trading Standards officers visit these establishments, and whether this regularity would change based on the decision taken at this Sub-Committee. Mr. Sharland outlined the impacts of a 2019 regional project which required all relevant authorities in the southeast to visit shisha bars and cafes to investigate compliance. In Oxfordshire, widespread non-compliance was reported on but follow up action was limited by the onset of the pandemic. The more recent review has included visits to the relevant locations again since 2024. Mr. Sharland also explained that future enforcement visits would be dictated by prioritisation and the capacity of a small team of officers.

Councillor Ottino queried whether regulations surrounding shisha is a topic which is relatively unknown within trade organisations, to which Mr. Sharland outlined the changes in regulations since 2019, and the difficulties of running a legitimate shisha business due to costs.

The Chair asked how the payments of £8000 to Mr. Opher at Thirst bar from Mr. Shridi, as the shisha operator, were accounted for. Mr. Sharland explained that customers would pay the shisha operator directly via cash or a card machine, and as a result, they would not be aware that they were dealing with a separate business. The Sub-Committee heard that Mr. Shridi had been evasive with further details relating to these payments and his comments did not seem consistent with someone who had been running a business since 2009.

The Chair queried whether any of the staff working for Mr. Shridi had communicated with the Trading Standards officers, and whether this had exposed any evidence of due diligence. Mr. Sharland explained that Mr. Shridi and his staff had not demonstrated awareness of each other's names, and no organisation or due diligence was apparent.

The Chair invited Mr. Baylis and Mr. Opher to make any representations to the Sub-Committee.

Mr. Baylis, on behalf of Mr. Opher, emphasised that no prosecutions had taken place so far, and the Sub-Committee's considerations should not be focused on attributing guilt or innocence. Instead, promotion and protection of the licensing objectives should be the main consideration. Mr. Baylis outlined that there was no evidence to suggest other substances were being sold or supplied within the premises, that all operations relating to shisha were run by Mr. Shridi without Mr. Opher's input, and that Mr. Opher had earned no money from any activities linked to shisha. The Sub-Committee were informed that in response to the information surfaced by the Trading Standards investigation, Mr. Opher has now replaced the previous management team and showed contrition for the events within Thirst by suspending trading voluntarily for a period of 2

weeks. Mr. Baylis emphasised the financial loss this has caused Mr. Opher, of an estimated £39,000. The Sub-Committee understood that Mr. Opher was happy to accept the conditions outlined within the report from Trading Standards and would be ensuring that no shisha is ever sold on the premises again.

The Chair thanked Mr. Baylis and Mr. Opher.

Councillor Upton queried how often Mr. Opher communicates with the manager employed at Thirst bar, to which it was explained contact has increased. Mr. Opher explained to the Sub-Committee that in the past he had been less directly involved in the business as he raised young children, and instead, his business partner from London handled matters and managers held more autonomy. In recent times however this has changed, and Mr. Opher is more involved in his business and has learned from the mistakes. In respect of the Trading Standards investigation, he noted his cooperation with officers, and in relation to the social media posts depicting shisha, he apologised and committed to removing the images tomorrow. Mr. Opher summarised by emphasising that he has now temporarily closed the business voluntarily under the advice of his legal advisor to demonstrate contrition and is accepting responsibility for the issues identified. Mr. Baylis clarified that the Designated Premises Supervisor (DPS) is currently listed as Mr. Opher's business partner who is based in London, however this will be changed to ensure Mr. Opher is taking more control.

In response to the Chair, it was clarified that Mr. Opher is based in Oxford and runs two additional business in the City alongside Thirst.

Councillor Ottino requested assurance from Mr. Opher that he will uphold the licensing objectives in the future, given his historic naivety. Mr. Opher clarified that he had been naive when allowing a third-party operation to occur within his business and he emphasised that he would not allow this again. The Sub-Committee were also informed that Mr. Opher had been running the bar since 1999, and this has been the first issue. Mr. Opher committed to never allowing third-party involvement in his business again.

Councillor Ottino queried whether any other staff from other third-party businesses are currently employed at Thirst, to which Mr. Opher noted on security and cleaning teams.

The Chair queried how staff training will be ensured and updated. Mr. Baylis clarified that all existing staff are currently trained and Mr. Opher explained that this was completed via a consultant company who specialises in staff contracts and legal compliance. The Sub-Committee also understood that a document to track training is also maintained and available to view at the premises.

Councillor Ottino queried how Mr. Opher had not profited from shisha operations, given that he had referred to it as a promotional activity. Mr. Opher emphasised that he had

not been aware of the potentially illegal activities of the third-party, or that there had been anything to therefore investigate. He stated that he had only rented out the space and that any activities conducted via the third-party business were an additional service.

The Chair requested further clarification regarding the relationship between the shisha provider and Mr. Opher's business. Mr. Opher clarified that it was an informal dynamic which had only become more formalised for insurance reasons when Mr. Opher's underwriter suggested a higher premium be paid in connection with shisha activities at the premises.

The Chair invited final questions; there were none.

The Chair invited summaries from all attendees.

Mr. Sharland referred the Sub-Committee to the findings of the investigation enclosed within the report and noted being reassured by Mr. Opher that the issues relating to shisha had now been handled and would not arise again in the future. As a result, no revocation was being recommended, and additional conditions and a short suspension were deemed more proportionate.

Mr. Baylis emphasised that the Sub-Committee should not focus on attributing guilt, but rather on a decision which supports promotion of the licensing objectives. Mr. Baylis concluded by noting that Mr. Opher accepts the mistakes discovered and commits to not allowing any third-party activity within the premises in the future; he has taken responsibility and voluntary actions to demonstrate his contrition.

*Mr. Sharland, Ms Esposito, Mr. Opher, Mr. Baylis, and the Senior Licensing Compliance Officer left the meeting to allow the Sub-Committee to reach a decision.*

The Sub-Committee deliberated in private.

*Mr. Sharland, Ms Esposito, Mr. Opher, Mr. Baylis, and the Senior Licensing Compliance Officer rejoined the meeting.*

The Chair delivered Sub-Committee's decision.

The Chair emphasised the Sub-Committee's concern with the serious nature of criminal activity which had occurred on Mr. Opher's watch, and his failure to uphold the licensing objectives focused on the protection of children from harm and the prevention of crime and disorder. The Sub-Committee also felt that Mr. Opher must have profited from illegal and harmful activity via the third-party activity and were concerned

social media posts via Thirst's account promoted and glamorised the use of shisha. The Chair emphasised that these actions went against the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act of 2022 and Oxfordshire's smoke free policy. Furthermore, the Sub-Committee had considered that usually, the seizure of such goods in a retail premise would result in revocation of a licence. The Chair emphasised the health risks and costs shisha encourages, and the pressure it places on communities and the NHS, whilst also undermining other legitimate businesses in the city.

The Chair explained that whilst the Sub-Committee would not be attributing guilt, Members had accepted Mr. Opher's apology and noted the serious actions he has taken to ensure that shisha is not present at Thirst.

**On this basis, the Sub-Committee resolved to:**

- **Suspend the premises licence (all licensable activities) until 16.00 on Friday 23 January 2026 and to modify the conditions of the operating schedule** to include the following conditions, effective from 16.00 on 23 January 2026:
  - No tobacco or herbal products to be stored, sold or supplied in the course of the business.
  - No waterpipes to be available for use on the premises whether by payment of a fee, or not.
  - A3 'Illegal Tobacco Keep It Out' poster including the illegal tobacco hotline reporting number shall be displayed prominently at the entrance and outside area of the licenced premises at all times (to be supplied by trading standards).
  - All staff working at the premises in a managerial or supervisory capacity (whether paid or unpaid) shall receive training on the role of Responsible Authorities. Training to include expectations from the company on how members of staff are to conduct themselves and communication of all visits and any written material in accordance with the management structure.
  - Training to be given on appointment to a managerial or supervisory capacity and repeated on an annual basis.
  - Records of such training to be kept at the premises and made available to any officer of a Responsible Authority upon request.

Additionally, the Chair outlined three additional recommendations from the Sub-Committee, including:

- That all illegal social media posts are removed immediately.
- That the DPS be changed to a more local individual, presumably Mr. Opher.
- That Mr. Opher shares his experience with relevant trade associations to prevent similar matters arising at other businesses.

Mr. Opher, Mr. Baylis, Ms. Esposito, and Mr. Sharland thanked the Sub-Committee.

*Mr. Opher, Mr. Baylis, Ms. Esposito, and Mr. Sharland left the meeting and did not return.*

## **101. Dates of Future Meetings**

The Sub-Committee noted the dates of future meetings.

**The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.45 pm.**