



Belfast City Council

Report to: Strategic Policy and Resources Committee

Subject: **Motion – Northern Ireland Driving Licences**

Date: 13th March, 2014

Reporting Officer: Stephen McCrory, Democratic Services Manager, ext. 6314

1	Relevant Background Information
1.1	Members will recall that the Council, at its meeting on 2nd February, passed the following motion, which had been moved by Alderman R. Patterson and seconded by Alderman Kingston:
1.2	<p>“This Council:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. expresses concern at the way in which the decision was taken by SDLP Environment Ministers to exclude Northern Ireland from the reforms currently taking effect in relation to the appearance of the Union flag on UK driving licences;2. believes that such a decision is likely to harm community relations and cause hurt and offence to those citizens who would like to see such changes apply to their own driving licence;3. calls upon the Minister to reverse his position and allow the changes to be implemented here;4. believes that if the Minister is unwilling to embrace such change he should, as an absolute minimum, introduce an ‘opt out’ scheme, whereby those who do not want to have the flag appear on their licence can choose not to have it and everyone else can; and5. recognises that failure to implement such a scheme would be unfair to those citizens who want the Union Flag to appear on their driving licence.”

2	Key Issues
2.1	A letter was forwarded subsequently to the Environment Minister, Mr. Mark H. Durkan MLA informing him of the Council's decision. A response was received on 18th February, a copy of which is attached.
2.2	The Minister points out that Great Britain and Northern Ireland Driving Licences are issued by separate and independent licensing authorities and that there is no UK licensing authority. In Northern Ireland, that function was transferred, under the Northern Ireland Act 1988, to the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Department of the Environment has responsibility under the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 for a range of matters relating to the licensing of drivers, including the form of driving licence.
2.3	The Minister then refers to correspondence which had, in 2012, been forwarded by the Department for Transport Minister, Mike Penning MP, to the then Environment Minister, Alex Attwood MLA, advising him of the Government's intention to display the Union Flag only on driving licences issued in Great Britain. Minister Penning had proposed, given the sensitivities around symbols, that the DVLA continue to print under contract Northern Ireland driving licences without any change to their existing design and had sought the Environment Minister's views in that regard.
2.4	Minister Durkan points out further that DoE officials had, subsequently, engaged with the DVLA to determine if it would be possible to offer applicants from Northern Ireland the option of either including or excluding the Union Flag from their licence. It had confirmed that the costs of making the required changes to the existing system to cater for Northern Ireland applicants would render that suggestion prohibitive.
2.5	The Minister concludes by stating that the Department of the Environment had received no further correspondence on the matter until the receipt on 23 rd December, 2014, of a letter from the current Department for Transport Minister, John Hayes MP, confirming that driving licences for Great Britain would continue to display the Union Flag and be excluded from those licences printed by the DVLA for Northern Ireland drivers.

3	Resource Implications
3.1	To be determined.

4	Equality and Good Relations Implications
4.1	None

5	Recommendation
5.1	The Committee is requested to consider the attached response and take such action thereon which may be determined.

6	Decision Tracking
Democratic Services Section will follow up on any decision taken.	

7	Document attached
Response from Minister Durkan MLA	