

SUBJECT: Inner East Lettings and Pricings Policy Consultation

1. Purpose of the Report

The report outlines the Inner East Lettings and Pricing Policy Consultation conducted between October and December 2008.

2. Background

In October 2004, the Council's Executive Board agreed a draft lettings and pricing policy for all community buildings which key objectives included: -

- Lettings arrangements and the prices charged for the use of the community centres should be transparent and be consistently applied across all centres;
- Prices charged for the use of the facilities should make a significant contribution to the costs of overall service provision and there should be no hidden subsidies;
- Lettings and pricing arrangements should encourage access to community facilities for everyone.

Following on from these themes, East North East Area Management conducted a consultation exercise between November and December 2008 within the Inner East electoral wards. The primary focus of the consultation was to communicate the latest draft pricing schedule and to gain feedback from community centre stakeholders. There were three main themes which ran alongside the key objectives highlighted above:

1. Has the policy been well communicated;
2. General views on the proposed Lettings and Pricing Policy;
3. How these changes will affect your organisation and what are your concerns.

3. Consultation Approach

The Draft Community Centres Pricing Schedule was subject to consultation with users and potential users of community buildings. A policy pack was sent to all groups where lettings information was available. Some consultation packs were also distributed by hand. To engage other community centre stakeholders who may not have details registered with the Leeds City Council, posters and additional policy packs were placed within centres to be promoted and distributed by caretakers.

4. Consultation Findings

In total, 58 individuals/groups expressed their opinions on the Pricing and Lettings Policy and considered its implications upon their activities.

5. Has the policy been well communicated?

The manner in which the policy was communicated was found to be transparent, easy to understand and clear. No negative feedback about the clarity of communication was received.

6. General views on the proposed Lettings and Pricing Policy?

The Pricing and Lettings Policy was widely accepted. Further to this, it was also acknowledged that charges have to be levied in order to maintain a portfolio of sustainable community buildings. Comments were made about the equality of discounts and how these would be applied to groups, especially those within the voluntary and community sectors.

- Charges were generally accepted as long as the funds raised would be used towards centre costs. It was felt that income from charges should be used for the benefit of each centre.
- Agreed that full market rates should be applied to private community centre users. However, where a group is offering a community service but operates with little or no substantial income generating activity, additional support should be provided.
- Some concern was expressed that not all community centre uses may receive the same level of subsidy.
- Other general concerns raised were that the community centres are no longer the 'centre of communities' whereby local stakeholders can freely access information, support and/or a communal space for socialising.
- The current lettings process was highlighted as being confusing and overly complicated. A review and reform of the process was welcomed if it ensures enquiries are easily processed and responded to in an accurate and timely fashion.
- Concern was expressed over the over-reliance upon lettings with many questioning the role of council tax in meeting the costs of community buildings rather than charging community groups which often provide invaluable services.
- Community centres were viewed as public venues which should provide a welcoming and informal space for users. Some activities may run at a loss which is justified because of the contribution they make to the local community.
- There is substantial concern for community groups which provide a social service yet generate little if any income such as Luncheon Clubs, Bingo groups, Domino groups. It is felt people need a place to meet, receive advice and such groups find it difficult to raise funds.
- Community centres are vital for community cohesion. The running costs are very unlikely ever to be fully recovered but the prices should reflect the level of need of the community they serve. It was therefore highlighted that an over zealous lettings agenda may have a negative impact upon local participation and consequently, mechanism to help with funding should be in place.

7. How will these changes affect your organisation and what are your concerns?

As previously discussed, it was widely accepted that community buildings are expensive to run and that income generating activities have to be pursued in order to provide sustainable services. There was concern about the impact upon groups which may have little or no income generating activities but still provide an invaluable public service.

- Service providers and groups working with young people (under the age of 19) and older people widely accepted the discounts as fair. The majority of consultation participants working with such groups didn't foresee a disruption to services.
- Concern was expressed regarding the impact upon groups which may have established histories within our community buildings but do not engage in any particular income generating activities. They accepted that costs may have to be applied but highlighted several issues including:-
 1. The ability of service users to meet any associated charges due to their socio-economic status;

2. Any funds allocated to lettings costs could effect service delivery due to limited funding;
3. Grants may be received from statutory bodies to support group activities but would then be taken back through lettings agreements in effect robbing Peter to pay Paul.

8. **Conclusion**

- The policy was accepted as clear, easy to understand and adequately presented;
- It was widely accepted that there are costs associated in running of community centres and that income generating activities should be pursued in meeting such costs.
- However, a 'one size fits all' approach may be insufficient in addressing the impact upon certain service providers which may generate with little or no income;
- No resistance was expressed to the level of discounts offered. There needs to be an equality in access to discounts.
- It was highlighted that groups working with any vulnerable group should be granted the same level of subsidy (especially BME groups and disabled people's groups);
- The income generated by some community groups (luncheon clubs, domino/bingo groups) may not be high enough to cover all charges.
- The current lettings process was found to be overly complicated with often conflicting information being received (Caretakers, Lettings Unit and so forth). This puts some groups off using community centres.