

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Education & Children's Services
DATE	28th January 2016
DIRECTOR	Gayle Gorman
TITLE OF REPORT	Review of Let Charges for Language Schools
REPORT NUMBER	ECS/16/001
CHECKLIST COMPLETED	Yes

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

A need has been identified for officers to review the approach taken to charging voluntary language schools for their use of Aberdeen City educational establishments at weekends, in order to ensure a consistency of approach for all language schools in the city.

This report sets out a number of options and makes recommendations for a way forwards, which elected members are requested to approve.

2. RECOMMENDATION(S)

That the Committee:

(1) approves the proposed Option 4, to remove all charges for lets for all voluntary language schools operating in Aberdeen City educational establishments, and

(2) approves the proposal that free lets would apply only to language schools which can demonstrate the following characteristics:

A not for profit organisation which provides extra-curricular, education based activities for children living in Aberdeen City, and where those activities focus primarily on learning about and through a specific foreign language and culture.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

If the recommended option is accepted by elected members, this would result in a loss of potential income to the Council of approximately £25,000 per year. However, given that most language schools are not currently paying for their lets, much of this income is not actually being received. The impact on current budgets would therefore be minimal.

The costs associated with the language school lets would be covered by income received from charges for other lets in Aberdeen City educational establishments. Where possible, other paying lets which also run at weekends would be allocated space within the same buildings, so that the income received from those lets would cover the costs for heating and lighting the building, and for janitorial cover.

With this in mind it may be necessary to move some language school lets to different buildings from those used currently, to allow several lets to run in the same building, and to ensure best value can be achieved.

4. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

The recommended option would help to ensure there is a consistency of approach and equal treatment for all language schools in the city.

5. BACKGROUND/MAIN ISSUES

5.1 Background

The letting of educational establishments in Aberdeen City is managed by Sport Aberdeen, on behalf of the Education, Culture & Sport Directorate.

The majority of lets are charged for, to ensure that any costs incurred by the Council resulting from the lets are recovered. These costs are primarily for the heating and lighting of the buildings whilst they are in use by the lessees, and for staffing costs for janitors who are in attendance during the lets. The charge for each individual let is determined by the scale of charges, which is advertised on the Sport Aberdeen website (see attached copy); each let is charged according to the size of the space to be used by the lessee, and the group category that the lessee falls into. Non-profit making groups and those predominantly made up of children, for example, benefit from discounts on the cost of their let.

At the Education, Culture and Sport Committee of 18th February 2010, it was agreed that specific types of let would not be charged for. These 'free let' categories include school approved extra-curricular activities (provided for pupils of the school), childcare and pre-school providers, Councillor surgeries, community council and community group meetings, and the blood transfusion service. The costs associated with the use of Council buildings by these groups are met by the Council itself, whilst all other lets are normally charged for.

5.2 Language School Lets

A number of voluntary language schools operate around the city, which run at the weekends within Aberdeen City educational establishments, through an organised let. These include the Russian School, operating

on Saturdays at Rosemount Community Centre, the Polish School, which runs from Aberdeen Grammar School on Saturdays, the Chinese School, which operates from Northfield Academy on Saturdays and Sundays, and the Libyan School at Bucksburn Academy on Saturdays.

These language schools provide children of primary and secondary school age with tuition in the native language of their families, along with opportunities to engage in a range of cultural activities, and are therefore seen to be of great benefit to the children and families who use them. Further details of each of the schools and the current arrangements for their lets are shown below.

According to the Committee paper of February 2010, language schools are not eligible for a free let, and should therefore be charged at an appropriate rate from the agreed scale of charges. However, it has become clear that over time, a disparity has emerged with the charges levied on these schools for their lets. Whilst some schools have been paying for their let for some time, others have benefited from a free let.

In an attempt to correct this oversight and ensure that all of the language schools are treated equally and fairly and in line with the agreed policy on charges for lets, officers wrote to the language schools concerned in September 2014, to explain that charges would be introduced from January 2015. In response to this, both the Chinese and Libyan Schools contacted officers and/or elected members, to express their concern about the introduction of charges, and to suggest that if the charges were to go ahead, they would be forced to close down the schools.

The introduction of charges for these schools was therefore temporarily put on hold, to allow for more discussion on the issue.

However, this does mean that there has continued to be a disparity with the charges levied on the city's language schools.

5.3 Current Arrangements for Language School Lets

The current arrangements for each individual language school let are shown below, along with the charges which would be made to these schools, if the existing policy was to be applied:

5.3.1 Russian School

Since September 2014 the Russian School has run on Saturdays at Rosemount Community Centre. Prior to this it operated at Aberdeen Grammar School. The school is attended by approximately 75 children and 30 adults. The school is not currently charged for this let, although under the existing policy the correct charge for the let would be as follows:

76 classrooms x 4 hours @ £3.59 per hour = £100.52
1 gym hall x 4 hours @ £8.70 per hour = £34.80
Total Charge = £135.32 per week

5.3.2 Polish School

The Polish School operates on Saturdays at Aberdeen Grammar School. It is attended by approximately 170 children and 30 adults. The school currently pays for its let, and the weekly charge is approximately £249.23. The number of rooms and the length of time they are used by the school tend to vary from week to week, and the school is charged accordingly for the rooms it has used.

5.3.3 Chinese School

The Chinese School operates on Sundays at Northfield Academy, and is attended by approximately 75 children. In addition the Chinese School also runs dance classes on Saturdays, also at Northfield Academy, and this is currently attended by 9 children. The school currently tutors pupils for Mandarin SQA awards. There is currently no charge made for the school's use of Northfield Academy, and the school has suggested it may have to close if charges are introduced.

If charges were applied under the existing policy, the charge for this school would be:

6 classrooms x 6.5 hours @ £3.50 per hour = £136.50
1 Drama Studio x 3.5 hours @ £3.59 per hour = £12.56
Total Charge = £149.06 per week

5.3.4 Libyan School

The Libyan School runs on Saturdays at Bucksburn Academy, and is currently attended by approximately 65 children. This let is currently not charged for, and the school has suggested that it would close if charges are introduced.

If charges were applied under the existing policy, the charge for this school would be:

2 social areas x 8 hours @ £3.59 per hour = £57.44
1 dining room x 8 hours @ £8.70 per hour = £69.60
Total charge = £127.04 per week

5.4 Other Language Schools

For clarity, it should be noted that the Total French School also operates in Aberdeen City. This is a full time independent school which runs in its own long term leased accommodation within the grounds of Aberdeen Grammar School.

This school is not a voluntary service running at weekends within Aberdeen City school buildings, and is therefore considered to be outwith the scope of the proposals presented in this paper.

5.5 Options for Consideration

Guidance is sought from elected members on an appropriate course of action to take in respect of the city's voluntary language schools and the charges for their lets. Possible options and their implications are set out below:

5.5.1. Option 1 (Do Nothing)

One option would be to continue with the current situation, with some schools paying for their let and others benefiting from a free let. This would ensure that the Chinese and Libyan Schools can continue to operate; however the Council could be open to criticism for not treating all of the language schools equally and fairly.

5.5.2 Option 2

Proceed with introducing the charges as set out above, in line with the existing policy, providing the schools with adequate notice of the change.

This would ensure that all language schools are treated equally and fairly. However, by introducing these charges some of the schools may be forced to close. This would be unpopular with the families currently using the schools, and the Council could risk some reputational damage as a result.

5.5.3 Option 3

Provide the language schools with extended notice that the changes in charges will be introduced in the future, and in the meantime work with the schools to identify external sources of funding to help cover the additional costs.

It may be possible to identify external grants which the schools could apply for, in order to cover the charges to be introduced. Officers could work with the schools to identify this funding, and a date could be set for the introduction of charges, allowing the schools time to secure the funding. This would ensure that all schools will eventually be treated equally and fairly, whilst also ensuring that no school is immediately forced to close. However, there is no guarantee that external funding could be secured, and a decision would then have to be made regarding whether or not to introduce charges anyway.

5.5.4 Option 4 (**Recommended Option**)

Remove all charges for lets from all voluntary language schools operating in Aberdeen City educational establishments.

Language schools could be added to the list of groups eligible for a free let. This would ensure all of the schools are treated equally, and it would allow all of them to continue operating. This is likely to be welcomed by

the schools and the families which use them. However, this would result in a loss of potential income for the Council, and it would mean that all costs associated with all of the schools' lets would need to be met by the Council.

Officers would attempt to co-locate the language school lets with other fee paying lets in the same buildings, in order to help cover the costs associated with the language school lets.

5.6 Definition and Eligibility

If the above recommended option is accepted by elected members, then it is also recommended that a specific definition of a voluntary language school is adopted, in order to make it easier to determine the eligibility for a free let for any new language schools which may come into existence in the future.

It is recommended that free lets would therefore apply only to a language school which can demonstrate the following characteristics:

A not for profit organisation which provides extra-curricular, education based activities for children living in Aberdeen City, and where those activities focus primarily on learning about and through a specific foreign language and culture.

6. IMPACT

6.1 Improving Customer Experience

If the recommended option is accepted by elected members, the experience of customers (the language schools and the families who use them) would be improved, in that all language schools would be treated equally and consistently with regards to their let arrangements.

In addition, the recommended option would help to ensure that the language schools can continue to run and provide valuable services to the children and adults attending them.

6.2 Corporate

The recommendation within this report links to:

- Smarter Living: Challenging inequality, promoting wellbeing building on cultural activity
- Smarter People : nurturing a city of learning

6.3 Public

An Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessment is not required, as the recommended option would bring about a purely positive impact on the ethnic minority groups who benefit from the language schools.

7. MANAGEMENT OF RISK

Whilst the recommended option would result in a loss of potential income to the Council, this is not considered to present any material risk to financial resources. No other risks associated with the proposal have been identified.

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

A copy of the current Scale of Charges for lets in Aberdeen City school buildings is appended to this report.

9. REPORT AUTHOR DETAILS

Andrew Jones
Service Manager, Assets & Finance
Email ajones@aberdeencity.gov.uk
Tel. 01224 523042