

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE: **Finance, Policy & Resources**

DATE: **20th September 2016**

DIRECTOR: **Gayle Gorman / Pete Leonard**

TITLE OF REPORT: **Review of Bookings and Letting Procedures in Schools and Learning Centres**

REPORT NUMBER: **ECS/16/054**

CHECKLIST RECEIVED: **Yes**

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report provides a summary of the findings to date of the current review of the Council's Bookings and Lettings procedures for schools and learning centres, and presents an outline of proposed actions to be taken to improve the procedures.

2. RECOMMENDATION(S)

It is recommended that the Committee:

(i) approves the proposal to develop a full online booking and payments system for the letting of schools and learning centres, as part of the Council's Digital Platform project, and for officers to make appropriate changes to the administrative procedures for bookings and lettings to align with the new online system;

(ii) instructs officers to investigate the feasibility and implications of transferring responsibility for administering the bookings and lettings system from Sport Aberdeen to an appropriate team within Aberdeen City Council, and to report their findings and recommendations to Committee in September 2017;

(iii) instructs officers to carry out a detailed analysis of the current charges for bookings and lettings of schools and learning centres, and to report to Committee in February 2017 with recommendations on any required changes to the scale of charges, to ensure the financial viability of the bookings and lettings system;

(iv) approves the introduction of charges for bookings and lettings at the new 3G artificial pitches at Northfield and Dyce, as outlined in Appendix 1, with immediate effect;

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no additional costs associated with the recommendation to develop an online booking system; these costs are already covered within the Council's Digital Platform project.

The recommended introduction of charges for bookings and lettings of the new 3G sports pitches would help to ensure that costs associated with running and maintaining the pitches are adequately covered by the income received.

4. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

Officers, with the support of the consultant, would be required to specify and test the recommended new online booking system, and to review the current charges and income procedures. This will be achieved through existing resource allocations.

5. BACKGROUND/MAIN ISSUES

5.1 Background

In recent years a number of reviews of the Council's procedures for the booking and letting of schools and learning centres have been carried out, with the most recent updates to procedures having been agreed by the Education, Culture and Sport Committee at its meeting in February 2010. This was prior to Sport Aberdeen taking over responsibility for administering the bookings and lettings process on behalf of the Council, in August 2010.

In August 2013 the then Education, Culture & Sport Service commissioned an external consultant to further review its bookings and lettings procedures. This resulted in a number of recommendations for improving the way in which the bookings and lettings of the Directorate's buildings could be managed.

As a result of the Council restructure in 2014, which saw the responsibilities for schools and learning centres being split between the new Directorates of Education & Children's Services and Communities, Housing and Infrastructure, along with a number of subsequent personnel changes in the two directorates, the findings of the 2013 review were not taken forward, and the procedures agreed in 2010 have therefore remained in place to date.

Officers have identified that there is a need to update the current bookings and lettings procedures, in order to provide a more streamlined and user-friendly service for customers seeking to book a venue, and also to reduce the officer time and costs associated with administering the existing system.

Officers quickly recognised that, given the changes to the Council structure, and also the length of time which has passed since the last review was carried out, some of the recommendations made at that time were no longer relevant. A decision was therefore taken to appoint a further consultant in March 2016, to work with officers in Education and Children's Services and Communities, Housing and Infrastructure, to take a fresh look at the existing bookings and lettings procedures, and to make some final recommendations on how they could be improved.

5.2 The Current Bookings and Lettings System - Consultant's Findings

Work was carried out by the consultant to identify the nature of the issues presenting from the current system. Interviews were carried out with personnel from Communities, Housing and Infrastructure, Education & Children's Services, Finance, ICT, a Learning Centre Management Committee, and Sport Aberdeen.

As a result a number of potential improvements to key aspects of the current bookings and lettings process were identified:

(i) Customer Experience

A review of correspondence from customers revealed a number of significant issues with regards to the experience of booking a venue through the current system.

These include:

- Significant lengths of time taken in waiting for a let to be approved
- Customers receiving conflicting messages and details about a let request from Sport Aberdeen staff and Council officers
- Customers being declined a let despite having been informed verbally that it had been approved.

(ii) Decision Making Process / Policy

The consultant found that there is no clear understanding of respective responsibilities or levels of authorisation between Sport Aberdeen and Council officers, and that this can result in disparities with regards to implementing the current bookings and lettings policy.

For example, Sport Aberdeen staff often feel unable to make management decisions with regard to availability of venues, priorities of access for different groups, and the charging policy for lets. This can

result in delays in making decisions about bookings as confirmation from a Council officer is often required.

In addition, it is not always clear to Sport Aberdeen staff which officer they should approach for a decision about a particular let request. Consequently, emails about lets can be passed between officers trying to make decisions or find answers. This can result in requests for both internal and external lets being long and protracted, particularly if the particular circumstances of the request are not covered neatly by the existing policies and procedures.

(iv) IT system

Many of the issues outlined above can be attributed to difficulties with the electronic database which is used to administer bookings and lettings for schools and learning centres. This is the same database which was used prior to Sport Aberdeen taking over administration of the system from the Council in 2010, and it is now perceived to be out of date and no longer fit for purpose.

For example, all applications for lets are submitted by customers on a paper form, and Sport Aberdeen staff are required to manually input the details into the database. This can lead to delays in Sport Aberdeen colleagues being able to confirm bookings with customers, particularly during the school summer term and summer holidays, when most bookings are submitted for the coming school year. Several weeks are required for staff to input the bookings into the system, before confirmations can be issued.

Schools are given priority access to spaces within school buildings for extra curricular activities after school hours, so their requirements need to be entered into the database before any external let applications are processed. Due to the time required for inputting data, schools are required to submit their requirements in March, for the use of rooms in the following school session starting in August. This can create difficulties for school staff as it is not always clear at this point in the year what their requirements will be for the following school session.

(v) Charging policy

Whilst there is an agreed scale of charges for bookings and lettings in place, the number of charging categories within this can result in some confusion, and consequently different interpretations can be applied to the charging policy, resulting in similar groups of customers being charged different amounts for using the same venues.

(vi) Financial processes

Finally, the current system for processing and recording income from lets is seen to be considerably labour intensive, and there is currently no mechanism for clearly identifying the levels of income generated by lets at individual venues. Consequently it can be very difficult to check

whether income received adequately covers the Council's costs for administering a let.

The main issues were found to be:

- Whilst Sport Aberdeen submits a monthly report to Aberdeen City Council detailing the charges for lets which have taken place, this does not contain the level of detail needed to accurately and efficiently track income and expenditure for individual venues.
- This is due to the limitations of the database used to process the bookings, as described above.
- Council officers are therefore required to manually check individual lines of the monthly report from the database, to ensure that VAT has been correctly charged, and to issue invoices.
- Bad debt is currently difficult to follow up as the booking form does not always identify the correct person responsible for the payment of a Let
- Currently 10% of income received through lets is returned to the establishment where the let took place, to help cover maintenance costs. It is felt that this is too low a return for the level of wear and tear often incurred in some venues.
- The return of the 10% income cannot always be attributed correctly in shared facilities, as the information on the booking form only identifies the facility, and not whether it is a school room or community room which was used

5.3 Actions Required

Online Booking System

From the information provided by the consultant, and through their own experience of working within the current bookings and lettings procedures, officers have concluded that a new IT system is required, to support and improve the booking, confirmation and charging processes.

An online booking system, through which customers could submit their applications and pay for their bookings direct, would allow for the automation of the majority of processes, ensuring that customers can receive confirmations more quickly, and helping to remove any subjectivity or misunderstanding about how the procedures should be applied.

A modern system would also allow for more complex manipulation of data, and more detailed financial reporting, which would allow officers to more closely track and monitor income against costs, ensuring the financial viability of the bookings and lettings system as a whole.

During the course of this latest review of the bookings and lettings procedures, and as result of conversations with colleagues in the Council's Customer Services and IT teams, it has become apparent that

there would be an opportunity to benefit from the Council's Digital Platform project, which is being led by the Customer Service Development Team.

The Digital Customer Experience Platform is being procured in order to improve customer experience across a range of Council services, and will include the required functionality to operate an online booking system.

Making use of the Council's Digital Platform to develop an online booking system, rather than procuring a separate system for bookings and lettings, would help to enhance the overall experience for the Council's customers, as it would be the same system used by customers for a range of other online interactions with the Council, helping to maintain a 'one stop shop' effect.

There would also be no additional cost to the Council for creating the online booking system, as this functionality is already included within the Digital Platform, funding for which has already been identified.

Given that the Digital Platform has only recently been procured, more work is required by officers to further investigate the level of functionality which is available, and time will be needed to specify and develop a booking system which suits the requirements of all stakeholders. Some adjustments to the existing administrative procedures for bookings and lettings may also be required, in order to ensure maximum benefit can be gained from moving to an online system. Colleagues have advised that the online booking system would be available to go live from April 2017.

It is therefore recommended that the functionality within the Digital Platform is developed, to create an online bookings and payments system for bookings and lettings of schools and learning centres, in order to improve customers' experience with bookings and lettings, and also to improve the associated administrative processes and reporting procedures (**Recommendation (i)**).

Review of the role of Sport Aberdeen in Bookings and Lettings

It is anticipated that the introduction of an online bookings system would mean that much of the current manual processing performed by Sport Aberdeen colleagues would become more automated, and the current level of support for the bookings and lettings process provided by Sport Aberdeen may no longer be required.

It is recognised however that some officer input would still be required following the introduction of an online system, for example in order to check new customers' eligibility for discounts, or to answer queries about the operation of the system.

Given this, and also recognising some of the difficulties that the review has highlighted connected with the delays in processing booking queries, due to the involvement of both Sport Aberdeen and Council officers, there may be an argument for transferring all of the responsibility for supporting the bookings and lettings procedures from Sport Aberdeen to an appropriate team within the Council. This could help to ensure that any queries are dealt with more quickly, and by a smaller number of officers, leading to greater efficiency within the system.

It will not be possible to measure the level of officer input required, however, until a new online booking system has been established and tested, so it is not possible at this time to confirm whether there would be sufficient resource within Council teams to take on this support role. A clearer understanding of the most appropriate model of support would be available following the introduction of the online booking system in April 2017, if this is approved. Until then officers would continue to work closely with Sport Aberdeen colleagues as we move towards adopting the new system.

It is therefore recommended that Committee instructs officers to further investigate the feasibility and implications of transferring responsibility for administering the bookings and lettings system from Sport Aberdeen to an appropriate team within Aberdeen City Council, and to report back to Committee on their findings and recommendations (**Recommendation (ii)**).

Review of charges and income

As outlined in Section 5.2 above, some significant issues were identified relating to difficulties in extracting meaningful financial data from the database currently used to administer the bookings and letting system.

Consequently, it has not been possible to date to provide an accurate picture of the effectiveness of the existing scale of charges, and the extent to which these cover the costs associated with administering bookings and lettings. It is therefore not possible at this stage to make accurate recommendations on actions which need to be taken in order to ensure the financial viability of the bookings and lettings system.

In order to address this, changes will be made to the existing booking and confirmation paperwork, as a short term measure, in order to obtain more detailed information on income received from bookings and lettings which take place over the remainder of 2016. This will then allow for a detailed analysis of these bookings, which will be used to assess the current financial viability of the system, and recommendations on any required changes to the charging and income procedures will be presented to a future Committee meeting.

Given that most applications for lets to take place during the school year 2016/17 have already been submitted, and these have been agreed

based on the existing scale of charges, it is anticipated that any changes to charges for lets, if approved by Committee, would be introduced for the start of the 2017/18 school year. They would then be reviewed on an annual basis thereafter.

It is therefore recommended that officers are instructed to carry out a further detailed analysis of the current charges for bookings and lettings of schools and learning centres, and to report back to Committee with recommendations on any required changes to the scale of charges, to ensure the financial viability of the bookings and lettings system (**Recommendation (iii)**).

Charges for 3G Sports Pitches at Northfield and Dyce

Whilst it is proposed that no immediate changes to the existing scale of charges are made until a more detailed review of income levels has been carried out, there is a need for agreement to be reached on the charges to be introduced for the new 3G sports pitches, which have been installed at Northfield Academy and Dyce Academy, over the course of the last year.

These are the first full sized, floodlit, professional standard all-weather pitches to have been constructed for Aberdeen City schools, and represent a considerable level of investment by the Council, in addition to grants received from Sport Scotland. The Sport Scotland funding was agreed on the condition that the pitches are made available to the public and to local 'partner' sports teams, and a detailed maintenance programme is also required to be followed in order to ensure the pitches remain at a suitable standard.

The pitches have therefore been made available to external customers as part of the bookings and lettings programme. However, as these are the first pitches of their kind to be included in the programme, the current scale of charges does not include a charge for this type of facility. Whilst there is a charge in the existing scale for a sand-dressed artificial pitch (£43.35 per hour for adults), this was not intended to be used for a full-size, floodlit, professional standard pitch, and it is felt that this charge would not be appropriate for the Northfield and Dyce pitches.

It is important that charges for use of the pitches by external customers are adequate in covering the costs of running and maintaining the pitches, so a new set of charges for 3G pitches has been proposed.

Given that the pitches are already in use by the local partner sports clubs (currently free of charge pending a decision on the level of charges to be introduced), it is proposed that agreement on the charges is reached now, to take effect immediately, in order to maximise the income which can be generated from the pitches. Agreeing the charges will also allow for the pitches to be made available to other groups and individuals, which will generate further income for the pitches.

The proposed scale of charges and procedures for the operation of the pitch are outlined in Appendix 1. The level of charges has been established following a benchmarking exercise carried out in 2015, which looked at the charges for the use of other full size, floodlit, professional standard all weather pitches run by other organisations across Aberdeen and in Edinburgh. Details of this are provided in Appendix 2.

If approved, it is proposed that the charges would remain at these levels until at least August 2018. It is anticipated that a new scale of charges for all other types of venue will be introduced from August 2017 (as per recommendation (iii) above), which would then be reviewed annually. The 3G pitch charges would also be reviewed annually starting from August 2018, alongside the other charges.

It is therefore recommended that Committee approves the proposed scale of charges and operating procedures for the new 3G pitches, as outlined in Appendix 1, to take immediate effect (**Recommendation (iv)**).

Proposed timeline of activity

The following timeline provides a summary of the proposed activity to take place over the coming year:

Sept 16:	Introduction of new charges for Dyce and Northfield 3G pitches
Sept 16 – Jan 17:	Detailed review of all other let charges and income
Sept 16 – Apr 17:	Specification and commissioning of online booking system
Feb 17:	Report to FP&R Committee with recommendations on charges and income
Apr 17 – Aug 17:	Testing / piloting of online booking system
Sept 17:	Introduction of new online booking system, with revised booking procedures, and new scale of charges
Sept 17:	Report to FP&R Committee on feasibility of transferring bookings and lettings from Sport Aberdeen to Council officers

6. IMPACT

Improving Customer Experience

The introduction of a new and improved set of procedures for administering the booking and letting of schools and learning centres, specifically through the use of a new online booking system, will bring about significant improvements to customers' experience when booking lets within our buildings. The proposals put forward in this paper will allow the Council to be more responsive to customers' needs and to establish a more efficient and user-friendly bookings and lettings system.

Improving Staff Experience –

The proposed changes to the bookings and lettings system will allow officers to work more efficiently, and to respond more quickly to customer enquiries. Staff will feel more confident in dealing with customers as they will have the knowledge that the system and the procedures are fully fit for purpose.

Improving our use of Resources –

The proposal to introduce an online booking system to remove or reduce the existing manual procedures provides a good opportunity to bring about efficiencies and make better use of resources. The new system will modernise and transform our approach to bookings and lettings and following a review of charges and income will allow us to achieve financial savings in future.

Corporate

Aberdeen the Smarter City

- (i) We will enhance the physical and emotional wellbeing of all our citizens by offering support and activities which promote independence, resilience, confidence and self-esteem.
- (ii) Working with our third, public and private sector partners, we will provide opportunities for lifelong learning which will develop knowledge, skills and attributes of our citizens to enable them to meet the changing demands of the 21st Century.
- (iii) Again, working with partners, we will create a City of Learning which will empower individuals to fulfil their potential and contribute to the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of our communities.
- (iv) We will aim to have a workforce across the city which has the skills and knowledge to sustain, grow and diversify the city economy.

Public

It was not necessary to carry out a full equalities and human rights impact assessment for this report.

7. MANAGEMENT OF RISK

If the recommendations within this report are accepted by Committee, there is potential for a loss of income due to a reduction in demand for lets caused by the introduction of an online booking system. The risk level associated with this is deemed to be low; to mitigate against the risk, a paper based booking option will be maintained as an alternative for those who are unable to access the online system.

There is also a risk that the recommended charges for the 3G pitches result in customers choosing not to use the new pitches, and using pitches run by other organisations instead. The risk level associated with this is deemed to be low. The proposed charges have been established following a benchmarking exercise to ensure they are competitive with other venues in the city and elsewhere in Scotland. Some partner sports clubs have also been informally consulted on the proposed charges and have confirmed that they feel the charges are fair and appropriate.

If the recommendations contained within this report are not accepted by Committee, there is a high risk that customers will continue to feel frustrated by the existing bookings and letting system, leading to reputational damage for the Council.

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

The following papers are attached as appendices:

Appendix 1 – 3G pitch charges

Appendix 2 – 3G pitch cost benchmarking

9. REPORT AUTHOR DETAILS

Andrew Jones
Service Manager, Assets & Finance
Education & Children's Services
Tel: 01224 523042

Kay Diack
Locality Manager (Communities & Partnerships)
Communities, Housing and Infrastructure
Tel: 07778 872309