

Policy and Finance Committee

Date: 20 January 2020

Title: White House meeting room hire

Purpose of the Report: To seek committee approval

Contact Officer: Sarah Sandiford, Head of Democratic and Central Services

Corporate Objective/s		LLTC Five Year Plan
Implications:		
Financial	✓	
Human Resources	X	
Operational/Service delivery	✓	
Procedural/Legal	X	
Risk/Health and Safety	X	

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

Should Members be minded, the proposals are:

- 1.1 To note the report.
- 1.2 To endorse that after Council use, priority continues to be given to free of charge use of White House rooms by not-for-profit groups (subject to room availability), ahead of commercial/private hire.
- 1.3 To endorse that existing hire charges and annual review arrangements for commercial/private use of White House meeting rooms remain unchanged, i.e. that an annual increase of September RPI plus 1% rounded up to the nearest 50p be applied from 1 April each year.

2. CONTEXT

- 2.1 The Astral Park Task and Finish group was formed in late 2018 to consider the operational workings of the Astral Park Sports and Community Centre. From its initial meeting however, it was agreed to widen its remit to look at all Town Council hireable assets.
- 2.2 In addition to looking at many aspects of the operational running of the Astral

Park Sports and Community Centre, the Task and Finish Group gave consideration to fees and charges for hireable assets, as well as ways in which to support and encourage use by not-for-profit groups such as community groups or start-up groups.

- 2.3 At its meeting held on 19 November 2019, the Task and Finish Group put forward recommendations for fees and charges for pavilion hire from 1 April 2020, which were subsequently endorsed by the Grounds and Environmental Services Committee on 2 December 2019.
- 2.4 At the same meeting, the Task and Finish Group gave consideration to the meeting room hire charges at the White House and made the following recommendation to the Policy and Finance Committee: **To consider the fees and charges relating to use of the White House from 1 April 2020.**

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Whilst a centrally located building which could be considered a community resource, use of the Council Chamber and Meeting Room at the White House has always been subject to the balancing of availability for council/councillor use, staff use, use by community/not-for-profit organisations and private hire.
- 3.2 At a meeting held on 22 September 2008, the Committee was advised that nine local community groups were currently using the White House free of charge, in addition to use by the Council. This left little availability for other uses. Use of the rooms outside of working hours was recognised to be problematic in terms of staffing cover. Committee therefore agreed not to try to maximise the use of the Council Chamber and Meeting Room beyond the current uses.
- 3.3 At a subsequent meeting held on 28 February 2012, the Committee was asked to revise this policy to include private/commercial hire during normal office hours as a means of generating income, as a result of the occasional enquiries received. The principle and a proposed scale of charges was agreed. Charges are relatively high compared with local hall hire.
- 3.4 At a Committee meeting held on 27 February 2017, it was agreed to apply an annual increase in fees of the September RPI plus 1%, rounded up to the nearest 50p before VAT, in line with fee increases agreed by Council for other hireable assets and services.
- 3.5 The overarching premise over the years has been to ensure that one of the two rooms is available at all times for Council use and to then give priority to supporting free of charge use by not for profit organisations and groups (during normal working hours, or evenings when the building is open and manned due to Council meetings taking place). External, commercial hire has been minimal.

4. CURRENT STATUS

- 4.1 The current income budget for White House room hire is minimal, at £1000/year, reflecting a low level of commercial/private bookings.
- 4.2 In addition to Council use, bookings for the year 2019-2020 have included free of charge uses (during normal working hours or evenings when the building is open and manned due to a Council meeting taking place) for groups and organisations including: Watch schemes, P3, In Bloom, Town Twinning Forum, Ouzel Valley Park Steering Group, Sandpit Steering Group, Central Bedfordshire Council, Bedfordshire Police and the NHS.
- 4.3 Private, commercial hire uses have been low: two full day hires of the Council Chamber, five hires of the Meeting Room and one regular hirer (14 bookings throughout the year) of the Meeting Room.
- 4.4 Despite its location, the Town Council's lack of car parking may affect its attractiveness as a meeting venue. Current room hire charges are also high in comparison to other venues. Anecdotal feedback from occasional enquirers cites these two factors as the main reasons for not proceeding to confirm a booking.

5. CONSIDERATIONS

- 5.1 It is important that a meeting room is available for Council uses at most times; beyond formal meetings, it is often necessary to have a private space available to deal with enquiries from the public, particularly when relating to cemetery matters.
- 5.2 The Council has limited resource available to service external meetings.
- 5.3 Consideration needs to be given to security and data protection, as well as the potential for disruption to the day to day operations of the Council.
- 5.4 Currently, priority (after Council uses) is given to not-for-profit uses offering community benefit.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 It is recommended that in view of the above, no change be made to the current fee structure for commercial/private hire of meeting rooms in the White House and that the resolution made in 2017 in terms of an annual increase (in line with other Council fees and charges) continue to be applied.
- 6.2 It is further recommended that priority (after Council uses) continues to be given to free of charge use by not-for-profit organisations (subject to availability), ahead of commercial/private hire.

End.