
Agenda Item: Public Halls Report

Meeting Date: Monday 19th January

Contact Officer: Venue & Events Officer

The purpose of this report is to provide updates and seek direction on the management of the Town Council's two public halls. These important community venues must be well maintained and effectively operated to meet local needs and support the Council's strategic objectives.

This report outlines a proposed Minimum Spend Policy for private hire of council managed bars, reviews the public halls booking cancellation policy and provides any other updates relating to the management of the public halls.

Minimum Spend Policy

Background

The Corn Exchange and Burwell Hall are regularly hired for private and exclusive events where bar provision is not included in the standard hire fee. Opening the bar for such events generates additional costs, including staffing, utilities, additional setup, and close-down time. The current policy means that **private event hirers** of the Corn Exchange or Burwell Hall who wish to have bar service in addition to venue hire, are charged a flat hire rate of £50.00 per event. This rate applies regardless of the event's duration, size, number of staff or bar takings. This figure, initially intended to cover costs, has remained the same since the bar has been in place at the Corn Exchange and has not risen in line with operational costs. A minimum spend policy proposal was presented at the Policy, Governance and Finance committee meeting on 17th November 2025. Members requested that the officer defer the report to the Halls Cemeteries and Allotments Committee on Monday 19th January, with additional detail on how the policy can be effectively enforced whilst mitigating deterring potential hirers.

Current Situation

A revised "Private Bar Hire" loss-prevention policy has therefore been developed to ensure cost recovery without imposing arbitrary or excessive conditions on private hirers. The below policy is designed to minimise deterrent of potential hirers and focusses on prioritising loss-prevention, transparency in communication and providing the hirer with a choice.

How The Policy Works

Where a private hirer requests the bar to be opened, the hirer must select one of the following two loss-protection mechanisms.

Option 1: Cost-Based Minimum Bar Spend

A minimum spend calculator has been built (*figure 1*), estimated using direct staffing costs and overheads per event, to suggest a minimum spend on an event-by-event basis. The minimum spend figure is designed to aim for a 15% net margin, providing a small buffer which further protects the bar from operating at a loss. The cost values inputted into the calculator will move in line with increases in operational and staffing costs and will be guided by the RFO.

A loss-preventing minimum spend figure will be calculated and quoted to the hirer at the point of booking enquiry, based on their event requirements.

Event Details	Value	Notes
Number of bar staff	2	Based on Event requirements and number of guests
Event Duration	6	Includes set up / pack down of bar
Hourly rate per staff (£)	£16	Includes ER NI
Additional Staffing hours	0	Supporting staff during event for bar purposes only (e.g. Glass collecting, welcome drinks extra staff for busier period)
Additional fixed costs (£10 per hour)	£60	Estimated additional overheads for operating bar (water, electricity etc.)
Estimated number of guests	70	To calculate number of staff required and spend per head
Average Bar Stock Margin	59%	
COST CALCULATOR		
Total Staffing Cost	192	
Additional fixed costs (£)	60	
Total Fixed Cost	252	
Estimated Breakeven Sales	£512.54	(Fixed cost / average margin) X 1.2
Minimum Spend (15% net margin)	£589.42	((Fixed cost X 1.15) / average margin) X 1.2
Spend per head	£8.42	Information for hirer

Figure 1

Where a hirer elects a minimum bar spend, a **refundable deposit equivalent to the total fixed cost figure** will be taken. This ensures the venue is protected against loss while allowing the hirer to recover the cost through bar sales. If the event falls short of the minimum spend, the difference is deducted from the deposit. The hirer is only liable up to the deposit amount, as this is a loss-prevention policy, charging above that would be profit-maximising.

Option 2: Cost-Based Flat Fee

The hirer can choose to pay the fixed cost figure as a flat, non-refundable fee, meaning there are no minimum spend requirements for their event. Whilst at face value this looks like an obvious 2nd best choice financially, there are some reasons why hirers might choose this option. Some people will value certainty of cash-flow, less post-event admin and avoiding tracking and encouraging bar consumption during the event.

Having the fixed-cost and deposit for minimum spend as equal figures, ensures the policy remains focused on protecting the venue from loss. The cost of running the bar for the event is calculated transparently and outlined to the hirer, so neither the fixed fee nor deposit for minimum spend should exceed this figure. If the fixed fee were lower than the deposit, it would imply that either the fixed fee does not actually cover costs, or the deposit overstates the financial risk on the venue. Likewise, if the fixed fee is higher than the deposit, it implies that the fixed fee is being charged above the actual cost of operating the bar.

By offering a choice between a fixed, known cost and a capped, variable cost, the policy removes uncertainty, avoids a mandatory minimum spend, and allows hirers to select the option best suited to their event, thereby reducing the likelihood of deterring bookings.

Introduction and Administration:

The proposed policy is straightforward to implement:

- Existing booking systems and point-of-sale software can easily track, and record spend levels against each event. This can be easily accessed via the till during the event to inform the hirer of the spend progress.
- The terms and conditions of hire would be updated to outline the new bar hire policy and the two options of covering the cost.

Delivering the Policy:

- The venue & events team will handle all private bar hire enquiries, ensuring the policy is explained clearly to the potential hirers.
- Communication and reasoning for the policy will centre around covering operating costs and staff will provide re-assurance to the hirers explaining how the minimum spends are set to be realistic.
- Avoiding defensive and negative language such as “you will be charged” or “penalties” etc. will solidify that the policy isn’t trying to maximise profit and minimise deterrence of hirers.

Local Community / Charity Events (Group 1)

Currently, the council offers a discounted Venue Hire rate for Charities and Local Organisations, with the same £50.00 charge applied if they wish to hire the bar for their event. The proposed policy and its charges are only cost-covering and therefore any reduction would be putting the cost risk onto the council. Members should consider the following options for Local Community / Charity Events:

1. The proposed bar hire policy applies equally to Community and Charity Events (Group 1), as it does to Private Hire Non-Charitable Events (Group 2).

Pros

- Keeps the policy simple and consistent for all types of hirers
- Remains neutral, avoiding allegations of preferential treatment.

Cons:

- May price out small or volunteer-led community events.
- Could appear insensitive to socially beneficial events

2. Group 1 bookings are charged a flat 50% (or other suggested discounted rate) of total staffing costs for the bar, using the same calculator. This means the council takes on 50% of the risk of staffing costs whilst keeping the venue accessible.

Pros:

- Keeps bar affordable and reduces deterrence.
- Still recovers some staffing costs, so no unmitigated financial risk.
- Simple to calculate and explain, appears fair to hirer.

Cons:

- Council takes on a portion of staffing cost risk (though still less than current policy in most cases)

3. The group is given the choice of a flat fee (50% staffing costs) or the same amount as a deposit towards a smaller minimum spend (estimated breakeven sales). This creates a similar condition as for private hirers, with the council taking on a small amount of risk to maintain accessibility.

Pros:

- Allowing choice aligns with private hire model
- Limits financial risk to council

Cons:

- Complex policy: difficult to explain to the hirer and outline the benefit and discount they're receiving, may deter them
- Overkill for small community events

4. Keep the current flat fee policy, currently set at £50.00 – Officers recommend that if this option is preferred, a rise to at least £75.00 is considered.

Pros:

- Keeps the bar accessible for charities and community groups
- No administration changes to the policy
- No extra deterrent to hirers

Cons:

- Charge not related to operating costs

- Significantly below the operating costs for most events
- Unscalable – punishes lower cost events.

12-Month Review of Cancellation Policy

The cancellation policy was updated to reflect the type of booking and is summarised by the table below. The policy considers income lost, likelihood of replacing booking, work completed for the booking and reputational damage.

Booking Type	Booking Deposit	50% Cancellation Fee	75% Cancellation Fee	100% Cancellation Fee
Standard Hall/Room Hire (Group 1/2)	Zero	N/A	N/A	Less than 72 hours' notice
Commercial and Sales (Group 3)	25% at point of booking	Less than 14 days' notice	N/A	Less than 7 days' notice
Party / Function	25% at point of booking	Less than 14 days' notice	N/A	Less than 7 days' notice
Show (group 4)	25% at point of booking	Less than 28 days' notice	Less than 21 days' notice	Less than 14 days' notice
Weddings	25% at point of booking	Less than 2 months' notice	Less than 1 month notice	Less than 14 days' notice

The cancellation policy has been in use for numerous bookings over the last 12 months with no backlash or complaints received. The policy remains appropriate for the activities of the public halls, protecting them from loss of income and reputational damage relating to public facing booking cancellations.

1863 Local Art Display

Officers are exploring the possibility of using one of the walls in the café to display local artwork. This will involve reaching out to local artists looking to advertise their work for sale, offering slots for a period of time. The wall on the right-hand side as you enter the Corn Exchange previously displayed photographs of Witney, on loan from a local photographer, who has recently collected those pictures leaving an opportunity to freshen up our display. The location is ideal for a public art display as it is open to the public consistently, in comparison to the Gallery Room which is regularly used for private hire.

Quality Control

WTC can open applications to display artwork with no guarantee they will be accepted. This ensures that the artwork displayed is in keeping with the Corn Exchange and 1863 Café and is inoffensive in nature.

Financial Implications

Members should consider whether this is an activity the council would like to offer and whether to do it free of charge to local artists or charge a commission for any sales generated via the display. Once a decision is made, officers can begin to implement this project. Officers advise the following for consideration:

- Rolling out the proposal and displaying the artwork will take up a small amount of officer/staff time
- The Corn Exchange already possess the equipment needed to display the artwork

Impact Assessments

The Town Council has a duty to consider the effects of its decisions, functions and activities on equality, biodiversity, and crime & disorder. Consideration should also be given to effects on the environment, given the Council's Climate Emergency declaration in 2019.

- a) Equality – No impact
- b) Biodiversity – No impact
- c) Crime & Disorder – No impact
- d) Environment & Climate Emergency – No impact

Risk

In decision making Councillors should consider any risks to the Council and any action it can take to limit or negate its liability.

- The current bar hire policy opens the council to financial risk of operating the bar at a loss for private hire events. The new policy is designed to mitigate this risk by avoiding operating at a loss for non-community purpose events, demonstrating responsible use of public asset.
- Enforced high-level minimum spends could deter hirers. Mitigation:
 - **Transparent, loss-prevention approach.** Keeps the spend requirement low and fair to the hirer.
 - **Providing a choice:** we are outlining the cost of operating the bar to the hirer and allowing them to choose how to cover it.
 - **Providing evidence-based figures:** Using the calculator above to provide a minimum spend figure and EPOS sales reports to determine deposit deductions/refund.

Social Value

Social value is the positive change the Council creates in the local community within which it operates.

- This policy will maintain accessibility to the council's venues, whilst protecting the council from operating certain events at a loss.
- The 1863 Local Art Display proposal will support the council's mission to use The Corn Exchange as a hub for local arts.

Financial implications

- Zero asset / software cost to introduce and uphold the new proposed bar hire policy. EPOS system already in place to provide figures needed.

Recommendations

Member are invited to note the report and

1. Consider the approval of the Bar Hire Policy for Private Event Hires
2. Consider the options for Charity / Community events bar hire and decide which is the most appropriate
3. Consider the approval of the 1863 Local Art Display and any charges to be associated with it