



## Report of: Executive Member for Economic and Community Development

Meeting of:	Date	Agenda item	Ward(s)
Voluntary and Community Sector Committee	15 December 2015		All

Delete as appropriate		Non-exempt
-----------------------	--	------------

## SUBJECT: Islington Assembly Hall: Free Hire Scheme

### 1 Synopsis

- 1.1 Each year, local community organisations are invited to apply for one of up to ten free hires of Islington's Assembly Hall. Applicants are assessed against published criteria and, if successful, have to meet any additional costs (e.g. equipment or technical), which are not covered by the scheme.
- 1.2 An evaluation of the scheme by the Assembly Hall management team and the Partnerships, Place and Culture Unit has indicated that the scheme is not currently functioning as effectively as it could and that improvements can be made to the application criteria and process.
- 1.3 This report sets out amendments to the scheme that will enable organisations to maximise the opportunities that free hires of the Assembly Hall provides and to enable the venue to maximise income generation opportunities.

### 2 Recommendations

- 2.1 To agree the recommendation to reduce the number of free hires through the scheme from 10 each year to a maximum of 8 free hires
- 2.2 To agree the changes to the application process and criteria as detailed in section 3.3
- 2.3 To agree the changes to the application timetable as detailed in 3.4 of this report.

### 3 Background

- 3.1 In the current scheme, 10 free hires are available to community groups who apply annually in January for free use of the Assembly Hall in the following financial year. The free hires are only offered for bookings on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays with access to the hall for a maximum of five hours.
- 3.2 Applications are advertised for 6-8 weeks with a deadline in January and a two month turnaround time for the decision making process. Recommendations allocating free hires are approved at the VCS Committee. Once approved, the successful organisations are offered provisional dates, These provisional dates are confirmed by the Assembly Hall management team at least two months before the event is scheduled to take place.

3.3 Applications are currently assessed against the published criteria which require applicants to demonstrate a commitment to provide events and activities that:

- a) Have a strategic value, and in particular a focus on at least one of the following four areas:
  - Arts and regeneration
  - Children and young people
  - Diversity
  - Arts and older people
- b) Have a borough-wide impact.
- c) Demonstrate a commitment to good practice (events that are viable, of high quality, well managed and evaluated).
- d) Promote the Islington Assembly Hall as a focus for high quality events

#### **4 Assessment of Current Scheme**

4.1 Evaluation of the current programme has identified several issues that prevent the Assembly Hall Free Hire scheme from achieving its full potential to support local organisations and are impeding the operation of the Assembly Hall as a commercial venture. The key issues identified are as follows:

- The current annual application process takes place too far in advance. The current timescales impact on the Assembly Hall's ability to plan efficiently its commercial hires programme. Islington Assembly Hall's management team has indicated that the times of year with most availability are January-March and July-September.
- The current application process is too long and confirmation of dates too late for community organisations to plan and publicise events effectively.
- In previous years, some community organisations have cancelled late. This has meant that the target of 10 free dates has not been met, and has resulted in wasted bookings, which could have brought in revenue through commercial bookings.
- Some community organisations have not made full use of the high quality performance facilities available at Assembly Hall, and have programmed events which would have been better suited to other Council operated venues.
- Extra charges for other items and services can make the hire more expensive for community organisations than might appear in the current application process.

#### **5 Proposed Amendments to the Scheme**

5.1 The following changes to the application process and criteria are proposed:

- Based on demand and take-up of the free hire scheme in previous years and the increasing pressures on the council to generate revenue to meet income targets, it is proposed to reduce the number of free hires from 10 to 8 per year.
- There will be two application windows each year, January to March and July to September in order to enable organisations to better plan events.
- The application window will be set at 6 weeks. The assessment period will be set at 6 weeks. Organisations will have dates confirmed at least 4 months in advance of the hire date.
- Staff from Arts Service, the Voluntary and Community Sector team and Assembly Hall management team will assess applications against the published criteria.

- The revised criteria will require applicants to demonstrate a commitment to provide events and activities that:
    - a) Have a strategic value, and in particular a focus on at least one of the following four areas:
      - Community cohesion
      - Children and young people
      - Diversity
      - Creative ways of engaging local residents
    - b) Have a borough-wide impact.
    - c) Demonstrate a commitment to good practice (events that are viable, of high quality, well managed and evaluated).
    - d) Promote the Islington Assembly Hall as a focus for high quality events, making best use of the high quality facilities available in the venue.
- 5.2 When fielding enquiries from organisations intending to organise meetings that do not make use of the high quality performance facilities of the venue, Assembly Hall staff may refer organisations to other Council run venues and community venues in the borough which may be more suitable to their requirements.
- 5.3 The application criteria will be published with a list of indicative costs for other items and services offered by Assembly Hall i.e. Technical support.
- 5.4 Acknowledging that the Assembly Hall is a commercial venue, the Assembly Hall management team will retain the right to cancel a booking in exceptional circumstances. On the rare occasions where this may happen, the Assembly Hall management team will find an alternative suitable venue and cover additional costs incurred by the applicant as a result of the cancellation.
- 5.5 The Assembly Hall management team will continue to administer the scheme, promoting it to the sector and managing the application process supported by the Arts and VCS teams. The free hires will continue to be offered for bookings on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays with access to the hall for a maximum of five hours.

## 6 Proposed Application Timeline

Application Round 1 January 2016 End February 2016 22 March 2016 End March	For bookings in July-September 2016 Application window opens for 6 weeks Application window closes VCS Committee meeting decision Dates offered
Application Round 2 May 2016 End June 2016 July 2016	For bookings in January-March 2017 Application window opens for 6 weeks Application window closes Decisions made and dates offered (within 6 weeks)
Application Round 3 October 2016 December 2016 End January 2017	For bookings in July-September 2017 Application window opens for 6 weeks Application window closes Decisions made and dates offered (within 6 weeks)

## 6.1 Key Benefits

- 6.2 A significant advantage for community groups and arts organisations is that the new bi-annual bookings system, alongside the minimum 4 months confirmation of booking, will make the venue more accessible, and it will be easier for them to schedule high quality events with marketing campaigns further in advance than in the previous system.
- 6.3 By reducing the number of free hires available, the Assembly hall management team will be able to generate income from commercial hires and offset the costs associated with administrating and running the scheme.

## 7 Financial Implications

- 7.1 There are no financial implications other than the loss of income as a result of waiving the fees for the eight hires which has been built into the business plan for the Assembly Hall.

## 8 Legal Implications

- 8.1 The Council can support voluntary and community sector organisations under the wellbeing power in Section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000. This gives the Council the power to do anything which it considers is likely to achieve the promotion or improvement of the economic, social or environmental well-being of the whole or part of its area or all or any of the persons resident or present in that area.

## 9 Environmental Implications

- 9.1 There are no environmental implications.

## 10 Equality Impact Assessment

- 10.1 The organisations identified meet the needs and priorities of a wide range of Islington's communities and help to improve equality within the borough.

## 11 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

- 11.1 The scheme provides an opportunity for the council to support local organisations through free use of the Assembly Hall. Applications have been assessed through a clear and transparent process.

Final report clearance:

Signed by:



Executive Member for Economic and Community Development

Received by:

Head of Democratic Services

Date

Report Author: Segun Lee-French

Tel: 020 7527 2234

Email: [segun.lee-french@islington.gov.uk](mailto:segun.lee-french@islington.gov.uk)