

Maximising Council Spaces: A Review of Business and Private Hire Opportunities – Witness Session 2

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| Committee name | Corporate Resources & Infrastructure Select Committee |
| Officer reporting | Carlos Montecino/Darren Deeks, Homes and Communities Directorate |
| Papers with report | Appendix A |
| Ward | All |

HEADLINES

This report summarises the room hire offer in public libraries and presents data around usage, hirer types and income generation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Committee notes the evidence heard pertaining to the review.

Lines of enquiry for Members during this witness session

The Committee will consider the development of a directory of local hireable spaces. This would improve understanding of available provision, enable benchmarking of pricing and facilities, and support a clearer picture of local demand.

- *Progress on Online Booking System* - The Committee is expected to note the progress made in implementing the online booking system, including the availability of initial data-driven insights on room hire utilisation and income trends.
- *Opportunities for Central Commercial Hires* - Members should note the potential to secure central commercial hires, which offer more stable and predictable income streams for the Council.
- *Engagement with Local Business Community* - The session will support discussion with the Hillingdon Chamber of Commerce and local SMEs to better understand business requirements. This will help inform targeted investment in existing hireable spaces, with the aim of increasing utilisation.
- *Tiered Pricing Structures* - The Committee is invited to note the suggestion to introduce tiered pricing structures. This approach seeks to ensure greater consistency across similar spaces and align pricing with demand patterns.
- *Promotion of Council Spaces* - Members are encouraged to support improved promotion of Council-owned spaces for both commercial and resident hire, enhancing visibility and

uptake.

- *Community Space Mapping* - The Committee will consider the development of a directory of local hireable spaces. This would improve understanding of available provision, enable benchmarking of pricing and facilities, and support a clearer picture of local demand.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Overview of Hireable Library Spaces

The library service manages a diverse portfolio of hireable spaces, offering varying capacities and access arrangements:

- Spaces currently available:
 - 7 dedicated meeting rooms
 - 2 main library spaces available as a pilot scheme
 - 1 smaller library area (the “Nook” at Ruislip Manor)
- There are also former adult education rooms at Ruislip Manor’s lower level that could be considered for hire; however, ongoing damp issues and the lack of accessible evacuation routes for disabled users currently restrict their use.
- Beyond formal meeting rooms, the service has facilitated hires within library spaces for commercial and partnership use, such as the “Nook” agreement with Barclays at RM and a trial branch pop-up with HSBC at Eastcote, which did not progress to a regular arrangement.
- Planned developments include new meeting rooms as part of library relocation and rebuild projects at Uxbridge (which will also feature a multipurpose space), Yiewsley and Northwood Hills.

Access to these spaces varies across the estate:

- During and outside regular opening hours (no access required to main library space): Oak Farm, Charville and Harefield.
- During opening hours (spaces accessed via main library area): Botwell Green, Ruislip Manor, Yeading, Ickenham.
- Outside opening hours (requiring access through main library): South Ruislip and Hayes end, generally limited to trusted community groups such as local residents’ association.

Online Booking Platform:

- The library service successfully bid for funding from the LibraryOn programme (£10K for set-up and first year fees) to implement an online booking system launched in May 2024 has improved booking management, automated payments, and enables the extraction of data for analysis. The project aligns with the Library Strategy’s goal of maximising asset use and generating commercial income and wider council agendas.
- Delivered via Kajima’s BookingsPlus, which allows:

- Space discovery (including virtual tours and pricing), booking management, and payments.
- Flexible booking journeys (enquiry only, book and pay, or instant booking) tailored to the gatekeeping needs of each space.
- Ongoing costs are covered by hire income: 3% of income for the platform itself and 7% for payment and financial administration. More favourable rates may be negotiated if additional services adopt the platform or when reaching certain income thresholds.

Regulatory Considerations

- Terms of hire were developed with the Legal Team and include requirements such as insurance and risk assessments.
- Additional requirements apply depending on the nature of the hire, such as safeguarding measures for activities involving children, along with local procedures including key holder agreements.
- The system requires clients to accept terms and conditions each time they make a booking.

Utilisation and Usage Insights

Scope and data:

- The utilisation period analysed covers 1 June 2024 to 31 May 2025. The data analysed has been extracted from the online booking system. This analysis excludes the “Nook” at Ruislip Manor Library, which is currently hired by Barclays. As this is not a dedicated meeting room but a space within the main library, it was not included in the original agreement for the online booking system and is not advertised on the platform.

Utilisation and hire patterns:

- Overall **utilisation** across all libraries is approximately 25% of available booking hours, dropping to **16%** when considering **paid bookings only**.
- The libraries with the highest utilisation rates and total **paid booking** hours are Botwell Green, Oak Farm and Yeading. Harefield and Oak Farm have benefited from large spaces and the ability to offer access outside regular opening hours. Botwell Green, while limited to access during opening hours, have seen strong usage supported by the commercial agreement with Barclays for regular hire of available spaces.
- Demand is generally highest on weekday mid-mornings (10–11am), afternoons around 3pm (after school hours), and on Saturdays. This aligns with the most common types of activities held in library meeting rooms, including business uses (such as Barclays), education and training (e.g. tutoring groups, informal education), health and wellbeing sessions (e.g. yoga, light exercise), and local community group activities.

Profile of paid bookings:

- Resident groups account for around two thirds (64%) of total paid booked hours, with non-resident groups making up 36%.

- Approximately 70% of paid bookings are commercial, though this figure is skewed by Barclays' use of Botwell Green. Excluding Botwell Green, there is a near-even split between commercial (53%) and non-commercial (47%) usage.
- While commercial hirers represent only 33% of all distinct groups (26 out of 79) who booked space, they account for a proportionally higher volume of bookings, indicating that commercial users tend to hire more frequently.

Income and Financial Position

- Room hire is the library service's main income stream and is subject to rising targets (£98k for 2025/26).
- Room hire income reached a record £93k in the last financial year, due in large part to the agreement with Barclays at Ruislip Manor and Botwell Green libraries. Excluding this additional income from the Barclays agreement, it remains below pre-pandemic levels (£49k in 2018/19 and £55k in 2019/20). Contributing factors are likely to include a shift to online activities, changes within local community groups, fee increases that could price out new businesses and adjustments to library opening hours that have limited access.
- Some pre-pandemic demand has been lost and will need to be rebuilt; reliance on long-standing regular hirers and limited marketing (largely word of mouth) has made attracting new customers more challenging. Despite this, there has been an estimated 22% increase in hire income in 2024/25 compared to the previous year, supported by a 10% rise in fees, continued recovery of demand, and the introduction of the online booking system, which has improved space visibility.
- Commercial agreements (such as the former arrangement with Barclays) have provided reliable income streams. However, the end of such agreements highlights the importance of diversifying income sources while balancing the needs of the wider community, other council departments (who use library spaces to reach residents) and the library service itself.

Hireable spaces are actively promoted through:

- Online channels - Listings on the Council's website with direct links to the online booking platform and library and corporate social media platform posts.
- Community and business engagement - Presentations and outreach to residents' associations and local groups, promotion to the Hillingdon Chamber of Commerce and at events like the Brunel Expo.
- Posters in libraries and on some external noticeboards.
- Publications - Article in Hillingdon People at the time of the system launch.

Feedback from existing hirers before the online booking system launch showed that fewer than 7% discovered the space via the website; most learned about hireable spaces through visits to the library or word of mouth.

Recommendations and Next Steps

- Community space mapping: Develop a directory of local hireable spaces to better understand available provision and benchmark pricing and facilities.

- Pricing and marketing: Early analysis suggests potential to adjust pricing tiers and trial targeted marketing or introductory discounts to attract new users and stimulate use during low-demand periods.
- Stakeholder engagement: Strengthen collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce, local SMEs and community groups to understand evolving space requirements, promote existing offers and guide investment decisions such as for example, assessing local demand for facilities such as hot-desking or meeting pods.
- Gather Insight from Existing Users: Undertake targeted user surveys with existing hirers to better understand the unique selling points (USPs) of our spaces, explore where they typically search for hireable venues, and identify additional features or services that would make our spaces more attractive.
- Broaden Local Marketing Reach: Expand marketing reach by exploring hyperlocal and community-focused channels beyond current platforms, such as Nextdoor and Facebook community groups. Other potential avenues include local WhatsApp groups, community newsletters, LinkedIn for professional or commercial hires, and partnerships with local schools, sports clubs, and voluntary sector organisations to widen awareness. With booking data now accumulated in the system, we can also track and assess the impact of these campaigns.

PERFORMANCE DATA

In addition to the utilisation analysis presented above, we have further information on the following:

- Hours Booked by Hire Category
- Hours Booked by User Group
- Meeting Room Utilisation Rates
- Hours Booked by Library
- Hirer Profiles by Library
- Peak/Off-Peak Usage Patterns
- Library Room Hire Revenue

See Appendix: “Library Room Hire Data” for details.

RESIDENT BENEFIT

Residents, including community groups and new businesses in Hillingdon, could benefit from understanding which locations in the borough and operated by the council are available for hire, broadening the scope of what council locations can provide. Competitive pricing, including preferable resident rates and the potential for discounts that support new initiatives and local businesses, could be considered and promoted.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

No comments at this point.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

N/A

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Nil

APPENDICES

Library Room Hire Data