

DERBYSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
IMPROVEMENT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
STRATEGY, REGENERATION AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

26 November 2002

Report of the Chief Executive

USE OF OUTSIDE VENUES

Purpose of the Report

To consider the outcome of the Improvement and Scrutiny review into the use by County Council departments, of venues outside the Authority's ownership.

Information and Analysis

The review was instigated, at the request of Cabinet, to identify the most effective use by County Council departments of venues for seminars, conferences, training courses and similar events. Each Department was asked to submit details of the types of events they held over the past year, and the location for each occasion.

Many of the responses indicated that County Hall accommodation was used and on some occasions, venues owned by District Councils or other agencies such as the local Health Authorities, were used, usually when a meeting was for a local issue and no County Council property was available. However, there were occasions throughout the year when outside venues such as local hotels and privately managed conference centres are used.

In these cases, officers were asked for more details as to why they chose to use venues outside the Council's ownership. They were also asked how County Council facilities could be improved to the extent that they would be used for their future events. The responses from the officers concerned are set out below:

What external venues are used?

Swanwick Hayes
Willersley Castle
Masson Mill
Cromford Mill

Local hotels such as the New Bath Hotel, Swallow Hotel and Hassop Hall.

Why are such venues used?

Hotels are used sometimes for residential training courses or similar events when groups of 20 – 50 people have to be accommodated. The Education Department in particular often have to get together groups of people such as school governors or headteachers for courses which are quite intensive.

These are held on a residential basis so that time is not wasted in people having to travel to and from a central venue from all points of the county. On these occasions this approach is more cost effective than paying travelling expenses over a number of days.

Other Departments hold one-day events for a variety of reasons, the most common being for conferences or seminars with smaller workshops as part of the day's proceedings. Staff who organise these events have expressed a number of reasons why they use non-County Council venues. These include:

- Parking, refreshments, seating, equipment and other necessities are all arranged by the venue management so that the organiser can concentrate on the real work of the day. Emergencies are dealt with by the venue management.
- Although some venues may not have been designed for conferences, they have been adapted to make them suitable and so organising the practicalities of an event is relatively effortless. For example, car parking at Swanwick Hayes is excellent and the main conference room is ideal for a large group meeting with smaller workshop rooms around the edge so that delegates don't have to move far for their discussion groups.
- As the conference is held in pleasant surroundings, away from the office environment, people are less likely to be distracted by 'phones and messages from their office base and are more likely to remain for the full day of the event.

In considering the use of County Hall accommodation, a number of problems were raised:

- **Car Parking** – The County Hall car park is consistently used to full capacity by staff and day to day visitors. When County Hall is used for events bringing large numbers of additional visitors, an area of the car park is usually coned off for their exclusive use. Whilst this does not impact on the delegates to an event, it does exacerbate parking problems for other staff of the Authority. In severe cases this also has a “knock-on” effect for local residents and businesses when on-street parking has to be used by staff as an alternative. Complaints and bad feeling often filter through to the event organiser(s) which add to the problems inherent in organising an event.
- **Availability of Rooms** - Quite often, a number of rooms will be required for an event, usually a large meeting room (such as the Members' Room) and a number of “satellite” rooms for workshop sessions. Whilst one or two rooms may be available on a given day, it is often not possible to book a series of such rooms. Also, the “scattered” layout of the meeting rooms at County Hall can be detrimental to keeping small groups together.

On occasions, rooms at County Hall are booked for an event, only to be cancelled to enable the accommodation to be used by elected members or Chief Officers. This occurs perhaps once or twice a month

on average. This is enough to deter people from taking the risk that their event may be thrown into complete disarray as a result.

- **Condition of rooms** – Whilst the Members' Room and most Committee rooms are now in good decorative order, well lit and have facilities for equipment such as overhead projectors and "Powerpoint" presentations, some rooms are still not suitable. For example, Committee Room 5 suffers from traffic noise and Committee Room 51 is windowless, ill-furnished and its layout is inappropriate for meetings of more than a few people. Rooms such as these may be suitable for meetings of short duration but are too uncomfortable for use for a full day.
- **Availability of Equipment** – Not all Divisions have appropriate equipment such as overhead projectors, video equipment, "Powerpoint" hardware or even flip-charts readily available. One of the burdens of organising an event at County Hall is locating and transporting such equipment, usually on the day of the event. On occasions when items are borrowed, it often falls to the organiser to return equipment at the end of the day when they are often required to attend to delegates and administrative matters. At most outside venues, all this is dealt with by the venue management, leaving the event organiser to concentrate on more pressing issues such as meeting delegates and attending to the smooth running of the event.
- **Catering-** For events taking place at County Hall or Chatsworth Hall, "Eurest" is used for catering. Whilst some event organisers found this service adequate, a considerable number referred to there being a better choice of catering at outside venues. In addition, there is very little scope for "sit-down" meals in the rooms at County Hall. The Members' Room was the only one really suited to this but if the room was used for the business of a conference or seminar, it could not also be used for a formal meal.

During discussions with staff, it became apparent that there was no comprehensive information on accommodation owned by the Authority that was available for use by departments. There are a number of rooms, whether at County Hall, in local area offices or in "service outlets" such as libraries, which were or could be made available to all departments. However, there is a need for information on these facilities to be more widely circulated, for example via Dnet, to increase the use of this accommodation.

The Social Services Staff Education and Training Division holds approximately 750 training courses each year and around 520 are held at DCC premises, either at County Hall or, far more frequently, at the Denby Training Centre. The reasons for using outside establishments are included in the comments set out above. However, officers responsible for organising events for the Social Services department suggested that the Denby Training Centre had great potential for upgrading to an excellent training and conference facility. Car parking at Denby was adequate and facilities were already suitable for certain events. However, there was scope to refurbish the accommodation and provide fully equipped meeting rooms and conference suites to rival those used in hotels and similar venues. The Centre's location

makes it suitable for meetings involving people from across the county and the staff who currently run the establishment are professional and very helpful to event organisers.

There will always be occasions when events have to be held at venues outside the Council's ownership. The Council does not, at present, maintain a list of approved venues that may be used on such occasions. However, if several suitable venues throughout the county were used on a regular basis, the Authority should be able to negotiate favourable rates for these facilities.

Financial Implications

It is difficult to ascertain the amount of money the Authority spends specifically on outside venues for various events as this expenditure is contained within the global budgets for training and other similar functions. However, the Committee may seek to monitor this expenditure over the next year by requesting each Department to contribute to an annual report to cabinet on this matter, highlighting expenditure incurred on the use of venues outside the Council's ownership.

Other Considerations

In preparing this report the relevance of the following factors has been considered:

Prevention of Crime and Disorder
Equality of Opportunity
Environmental, Financial, Health, Legal and Human Rights, Personnel
and Property Considerations

Conclusion

1. If Cabinet wishes to encourage greater use of the accommodation at County Hall for seminars, conferences, training courses and similar events, consideration will have to be given to the following:
 - * The provision of additional car-parking to ease the additional pressure when events are held at County Hall.
 - * A central contact officer be identified who would act as "venue manager" and assist in organising the event, particularly in providing display/presentation equipment, liaising with caterers and any similar matters inherent in event organising.
 - * Event organisers should have "security of tenure" once rooms are booked.
2. Consideration be given to developing the County Council's own facilities at strategic points in the county and a comprehensive system be developed to maximise the availability and use of all the Council's accommodation.

3. When outside facilities have to be used, “approved” venues should be used to enable favourable rates to be negotiated.
4. An annual report be brought to Cabinet detailing expenditure on outside venues.

Nick Hodgson
Chief Executive