

Corporate Policy Select Committee

Meetings Venues



March 2007

Corporate Policy Select Committee
Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
Municipal Buildings
Church Road
Stockton-on-Tees
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SELECT COMMITTEE – MEMBERSHIP

Councillor B Woodhead (Chair)
Councillor A Larkin (Vice-Chair)

Councillor D T Brown
Councillor Mrs S Fletcher
Councillor K Lupton
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Councillor Mrs M Rigg
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Councillor K Dewison
Councillor M Frankland
Councillor J M Lynch
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Committee thank the following contributors to this review:

Kath Hornsey – Administration Manager
Mark Wardle – Property Manager
Barbara Campbell – Diversity Officer
Martin Skipsey – Procurement and Payment Manager
Ian Miles – Head of Information and Communication Technology
Alfred Mitchinson – Disability Advisory Group Member
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Foreword

The review was undertaken as a short and focused piece of work primarily with a view to reducing the pressure on corporate meeting venues and ensuring consistency in the standard of facilities offered.

The review revealed that in addition to the corporate meeting venues available for general booking, there were also many departmental meeting rooms across the Authority.

A key recommendation from the review is to make information on all internal meeting venues available on the Council's intranet. Whilst it is recognised that some of the meeting rooms have to be kept available for use by individual services at short notice, it is hoped that providing more information will help officers to identify suitable accommodation for meetings and help to reduce reliance on external meeting venues.

I would particularly like to thank Alfred Michinson and Carol Howson from the Stockton Disability Advisory Group who accompanied Members on site visits to a range of meeting venues. Their input was invaluable and helped Members to understand the problems that people with different disabilities might have in accessing meeting rooms. Whilst the visits were useful in highlighting some problems, the Committee were pleased that full access audits of the Council's buildings including the meeting rooms would be completed during 2007.

I would also like to thank the officers who have supported the Committee during the review. In particular, Kath Horsey (Administration Manager), Mark Wardle (Property Manager) and Judy Trainer who provided scrutiny support.

Councillor Bill Woodhead
Chair – Corporate Policy Select Committee



Original Brief

The Thematic Select Committee's overall AIM in doing this work is:

To evaluate the appropriateness, quality and ease of booking meeting venues for Member and Officer meetings

The main OBJECTIVES are:

To undertake a full audit of all of Council owned venues available to Members, Officers and Partners

Audit of external venues currently used

To create a consistent policy regarding booking of meeting venues

To set standard for appropriateness and services offered at venues

To establish guidelines on requirements for official meetings of the Council

To establish guidelines on requirements for Officer meetings

The possible OUTPUTS (changes in service delivery) are:

Solutions to minimise pressure on meeting rooms

Solutions to maximise opportunities for accessing under utilised meeting rooms, where appropriate

To identify opportunities to maximise income and minimise expenditure, where appropriate

To identify whether there is an unmet demand for Council venues

Improvements to rooms/facilities

Consistent service provision for booking meetings.

Use of external venues

Consistent standard of equipment and environment at all meeting rooms

Venues that are accessible to all Members of the public (where appropriate)

What specific value can scrutiny add to this topic?

Analysis of issue from a corporate perspective

Who will the panel be trying to influence as part of their work?

Cabinet, Council

Who can provide us with further relevant evidence? (Cabinet Member/portfolio holder, officer, service user, general public, expert witness, etc.)

Cabinet Member, Corporate Director, Administration Manager, Property Manager, Senior Democratic Services – Team Leader, Members, other Council Officers

1.0 Executive Summary

1.1 In accordance with the aims and objectives of the Corporate Plan, and that of individual service plans, meeting rooms and conference facilities should be provided throughout the property portfolio to enhance service provision and support the effectiveness of the organisation.

1.2 There are currently two types of meeting facility within Council-owned premises, namely corporate and operational.

1.3 Corporate conference and meeting facilities are distinguished by the fact that no particular department or service is recharged for the accommodation space the facility occupies. Consequently the meeting rooms are available for any service to use, free of charge, subject to availability. As they are limited in number, their use is often heavily in demand. The Committee found that usage of corporate meeting facilities was at capacity.

1.4 Room bookings for corporate meeting rooms are currently taken on a first-come-first-served basis. Little consideration is given as to the numbers attending the proposed meeting, the purpose of the meeting or how the meeting satisfies and/or supports the aims and objectives of the Authority. Priority is given, however, to any member of CMT or the Democratic Services function that may require any room at short-notice (subject to suitable, alternative accommodation not being found).

1.5 Caretakers regularly inspect and maintain rooms. They ensure room layout is maintained, they report any building problems or management issues to the correct persons and ensure water cooler machines are regularly stocked.

1.6 Conversely, operational meeting facilities are likely to be found in some form in most Council-owned premises and are those that have been set up by individual services as part of their own service-specific day-to-day operations. They vary in size and capacity, from small meeting rooms that can hold only 4-6 persons, to larger meeting facilities that can accommodate over 50 persons. They are often used for team and project meetings, for meeting clients and other services, training, conducting interviews, presentations, workshops, etc. The meeting rooms form part of any overall space requirement that a particular service has, and therefore they are charged a rent/service charge for space they occupy via the accommodation recharge system. It is often up to discretion of Heads of Services and the section heads of these individual services as to whether they allow others to use these rooms and whether they recharge a room hire rate to others.

1.7 If all meeting rooms throughout the Council's property portfolio were to become classed as a corporate facility, there would be a significant shortfall in both accommodation recharges and necessary financial and personnel resources required to maintain and manage all rooms to an acceptable standard.

1.8 Views were sought from officers responsible for the management of operational meeting venues on the scope to release departmental meeting venues for use by other services and whether Democratic Services, the operations of CMT and the business of elected Members should have priority over operational requirements when corporate meeting facilities were not available.

1.9 Most officers were comfortable with opening up use of operational meeting venues to other services (a flexible approach was already exercised in respect of a

number of venues) although it was felt that this should not be extended to outside organisations owing to security issues. It was stressed that the room would need to be left in the same condition as it was found. Some officers commented that a number of the operational meeting venues were required at short notice by the service and would not want the rooms to be booked up by other services. In addition, some of the rooms were not accessible for disabled users as there was no lift within the building.

1.10 Given the comments received, the Committee felt that services should be able to continue to exercise discretion in releasing operational meeting rooms to other services. However, the Committee felt that information on operational meeting venues should be publicised on the Council's intranet so that officers were more aware of alternative meeting rooms and could approach the service concerned if there were experiencing difficulties in finding suitable accommodation for meetings. It was hoped that this would also help to reduce reliance on external meeting facilities.

1.11 As part of the evidence gathering for the review, officers compiled a schedule of all of the Council's corporate and operational meeting venues and a selection of external meeting venues regularly used by the Council.

1.12 The Committee felt that the information compiled was a valuable resource and would again help officers in finding alternative meeting venues where corporate venues were unavailable or where there might be specific requirements for a meeting. The Committee recommended that the schedules should be developed to include further information on the facilities. This information could then be made widely available on the Council's intranet.

Recommended that detailed information on all Council meeting venues and a range of external venues (previously used by the Council) be provided on the Council's intranet to enable officers to make informed judgements on the best choice of meeting venue and that the information provided include:

- **facilities and equipment available**
- **occupancy**
- **barriers to access where known**
- **cost**
- **arrangements for getting to the venue by public transport**
- **distance from Stockton Town Centre**
- **booking arrangements**
- **whether Fairtrade refreshments are available**

Recommended that when calling meetings involving external invitees and Members, meeting organisers be asked to include information in a standardised format on the front page of meeting invitations directing those invited to where they can find further information on how to access the meeting venue, including parking and travelling arrangements and public transport and who to contact to discuss any access needs;

Recommended that officers be encouraged to make full use of suitable internal meeting venues before booking external venues;

Recommended that operational Meeting Rooms not currently on the Council's outlook system be added for ease of booking;

1.13 Under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA), it is unlawful for service providers, such as local councils, to treat disabled people less favourably than other people for a reason related to their disability. Service providers now have to make 'reasonable adjustments' to the way they deliver their services so that disabled people can use them.

1.14 Anyone organising a meeting needs to ensure that a full risk assessment is undertaken before knowingly inviting any member of the public or disabled person to a meeting in Council premises and reasonable adjustments should be made to conform with Disability Discrimination Act requirements where possible.

1.15 As part of the review, Select Committee Members volunteered to undertake site visits to a selection of meeting venues with a member of the Stockton Disability Advisory Group. At each site visit, a checklist was completed with Members' observations on each venue with particular reference to accessibility issues.

1.16 The Committee found that the quality and accessibility of the facilities varied from venue to venue but that there were specific problems associated with most of the meeting venues visited and improvements which could be made.

1.17 The Committee acknowledged that, although, the visits had been a useful exercise in highlighting the type of problems encountered by disabled people, they were not a substitute for a specialist audit of the facilities. The Committee were advised that full access audits were being undertaken of the Council's buildings and that this would include all internal meeting rooms. The audit was due to be completed by the end of 2007.

1.18 One area of concern which arose from the site visits, was the evacuation arrangements for disabled people unable to use stairs in the event of an emergency. The Committee noted that because the Municipal Buildings did not benefit from the provision of specialist evacuation chairs, the conference rooms on the first and second floors were not suitable for use by disabled visitors unable to use the stairs. The Committee were concerned that staff should be fully aware of this and that emergency evacuation arrangements from all of the Council's buildings be reviewed as a matter of urgency.

Recommended that the emergency evacuation arrangements from the Council's buildings be reviewed as a matter of urgency;

Recommended that the wording of the Council's Conference Room Guide and meeting room confirmations be revised to stress that evacuation in an emergency is the responsibility of the meeting organiser and that a full risk assessment must be undertaken before knowingly inviting any member of the public or disabled person to a meeting in Council premises and reasonable adjustments made to conform with Disability Discrimination Act requirements where possible;

1.19 The Committee noted that Conference Calling through the Council's existing phone system provided an alternative to holding a meeting in a conference room and concluded that the use of conference calling should be promoted for smaller meetings thereby reducing pressure on meetings venues. The Committee also acknowledged that this would reduce unnecessary travelling time and car journeys

and support the valuable work being undertaken by the Council as part of the Workplace Travel Plan Review.

1.20 The planned upgrade to the telephone system in March also created the opportunity for the Council to roll-out a video calling service internal to the Authority.

Recommended that the use of telephone conference calling be promoted for smaller meetings in order to reduce the pressure on conference facilities, unnecessary travelling and car journeys and, subject to available resources, the use of video calling be considered as a further alternative.

2.0 Introduction

2.1 In accordance with the aims and objectives of the Corporate Plan, and that of individual service plans, meeting rooms and conference facilities should be provided throughout the property portfolio to enhance service provision and support the effectiveness of the organization.

2.2 The Scrutiny Liaison Forum identified meeting venues as the subject for a short and focused piece of review work with a view to reducing the pressure on corporate meeting venues and ensuring consistency in the standard of the venues and facilities offered.

3.0 Background

National Context

Disability Discrimination Act 1995

3.1 Under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA), it is unlawful for service providers, such as local councils, to treat disabled people less favourably than other people for a reason related to their disability. Service providers now have to make 'reasonable adjustments' to the way they deliver their services so that disabled people can use them. Some examples of 'reasonable adjustments' include:

- installing an induction loop for people who are hearing impaired providing
- disability awareness training for staff who have contact with the public
- providing larger, well-defined signage for people with impaired vision
- putting in a ramp at the entrance to a building instead of, or as well as, steps

3.2 What is considered a 'reasonable adjustment' for a large organisation may be different to a reasonable adjustment for a small local business. It's about what is practical in the service provider's individual situation and what resources the business may have. They will not be required to make changes which are impractical or beyond their means.

3.3 Failure or refusal to provide a service that is offered to other people to a disabled person is discrimination unless it can be justified.

3.4 Anyone organising a meeting needs to ensure that a full risk assessment is undertaken before knowingly inviting any member of the public or disabled person to a meeting in Council premises and reasonable adjustments should be made to conform with Disability Discrimination Act requirements where possible.

Local Context

3.5 There are currently two types of meeting facility within Council-owned premises, namely corporate and operational.

Corporate Meeting Facilities

3.6 Corporate conference and meeting facilities are distinguished by the fact that no particular department or service is recharged for the accommodation space the facility occupies. Consequently the meeting rooms are available for any service to use, free of charge, subject to availability. As they are limited in number their use is often heavily in demand. The Committee found that usage of Corporate Meeting facilities was at capacity.

3.7 Administration Services (Service Stockton) currently manages all bookings and availability of these rooms, and Development and Neighbourhood Services provides both catering and caretaking services to ensure the rooms are adequately kept and maintained, and are fit-for-purpose. Tea/coffee beverage machines and water coolers are often provided at no charge to users. The costs of these services are borne corporately via the administrative buildings management revenue budget.

3.8 The corporate meeting venues are set out below:

Municipal Buildings

Floor	Name	Capacity	ICT Networked	Beverages	Booking Contact
First	Conference Room 1	10	Yes	Yes	Administration Services ext.6285
First	Conference Room 3	8	Yes	Yes	Administration Services ext.6285
Second	Conference Room 2	20	Yes	Yes	Administration Services ext.6285

Billingham Council Offices

Floor	Name	Capacity	ICT Networked	Beverages	Booking Contact
Ground	Council Chamber	50	No	No	Administration Services ext.6285

Stockton Town Hall

Floor	Name	Capacity	ICT Networked	Beverages	Booking Contact
Ground	Committee Room 2	26	No	Yes	Administration Services ext.6285
Ground	Recreation Room	22	No	Yes	Administration Services ext.6285
First	Committee Room 1	30	No	Yes	Administration Services ext.6285

First	Council Chamber	75	No	Yes	Administration Services ext.6285
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Operational Meeting Facilities

3.9 Conversely, operational meeting facilities are likely to be found in some form in most Council-owned premises and are those that have been set up by individual services as part of their own service-specific day-to-day operations. They vary in size and capacity, from small meeting rooms that can hold only 4-6 persons, to larger meeting facilities that can accommodate over 50 persons. They are often used for team and project meetings, for meeting clients and other services, training, conducting interviews, presentations, workshops, etc. The meeting rooms form part of any overall space requirement that a particular service has, and therefore they are charged a rent/service charge for space they occupy via the accommodation recharge system. It is often up to discretion of Heads of Services and the section heads of these individual services as to whether they allow others to use these rooms and whether they recharge a room hire rate to others.

3.10 Unlike the Corporate meeting facilities, administrative staff from individual services often maintain operational meeting rooms, and any furniture, fixtures and fittings, ICT and presentation equipment contained within is purchased by the service in occupation. Staff manage bookings from within their service and ensure room is clean, maintained regularly and fit-for-purpose. Finally, it is at the discretion of Heads of Services as to whether the meeting facility contains a supply of hot beverages and water coolers for use by meeting attendees, and whether the costs for the use of these facilities is recharged.

External Meeting Facilities

3.11 Owing to the shortage of council meeting facilities, external meeting facilities are regularly booked particular for larger events where there is not a comparable Council owned facility. There are a range of external facilities across the Borough.

4.0 Evidence/Findings

Methodology

4.1 The Committee adopted the following approach to inform the review:

Desk Based Research

Audit of Council owned meeting venues
Audit of a selection of external meeting venues currently used by the Council
Investigation into the cost of booking external venues
Investigation into the usage levels of corporate meeting venues

Oral Evidence

Mark Wardle – Property Manager
Kath Hornsey – Administration Manager
Barbara Campbell – Diversity Officer

Site Visits

4.2 Select Committee Members volunteered to undertake site visits to a selection of meeting venues with a member of the Stockton Disability Advisory Group. At each site visit, a checklist was completed with Members' observations on each venue with particular reference to accessibility issues.

4.3 In addition, Select Committee Members were invited to complete the checklist for other meeting venues where they were attending meetings individually.

Staff Consultation

4.4 Views were sought from officers responsible for the management of operational meeting venues on the scope to release departmental meeting venues for use by other services and whether Democratic Services, the operations of CMT and the business of elected Members should have priority over operational requirements when corporate meeting facilities were not available.

4.5 As organisers of Council and Committee Meeting as well as other meetings, Democratic Services staff were asked for their general views on meeting venues and facilities.

Evidence/ Findings

Corporate Meeting Venues – Management Issues

Municipal Buildings

4.6 No individual department is recharged any accommodation charge/rent for the office space taken up by Corporate meeting facilities in Municipal Buildings. The combined floor area taken up by Conference Rooms 1, 2 and 3 is 91.93 m², and the approximate cost of the accommodation recharge would be in the region of £12,300 per annum. This charge is borne by the "corporate centre" i.e. the administrative buildings revenue budget. Similarly, users of the meeting facilities are not charged any room hire fees.

4.7 The rooms are available for anyone or any service to use, subject to availability. Administration Services (Service Stockton) manages the booking system by receiving telephone calls from staff and Members or bookings obtained via the calendar application in MS Outlook. Administration Services reserves the right to refuse any request.

4.8 Room bookings are currently taken on a first-come-first-served basis. Little consideration is given as to the numbers attending the proposed meeting, the purpose of the meeting or how the meeting satisfies and/or supports the aims and objectives of the Authority. Priority is given, however, to any member of CMT or the Democratic Services function that may require any room at short-notice (subject to suitable, alternative accommodation not being found).

4.9 Caretakers (Community Protection, Service Stockton) regularly inspect and maintain rooms. They ensure room layout is maintained, they report any building problems or management issues to the correct persons, and ensure water cooler machines are regularly stocked.

4.10 Catering Team (Service Stockton) provide services to staff from nearby kitchens located on lower ground floor, first floor and second floor Municipal Buildings. In terms of the conference rooms, they ensure all drinkpac beverages are regularly stocked, that each Drinkmaster Rotondo beverage machine is functioning properly, and that food and other beverages are provided when requested. They are also responsible for clearing all used crockery after catering services are provided, and ensuring the rooms are left in a clean and tidy manner between meetings. The annual cost of supplying the beverages suitable for use with the Drinkmaster Rotondo machines is approx. £800 - £1,000 in Municipal Buildings.

4.11 The Land & Property Team provides the water coolers and bottles for the conference rooms, which are available for use by meeting attendees free of charge. The annual cost of providing water and cups to the meeting rooms is approx £1,000 per annum. £13,206 and £10,126 (2006/07) respectively are charged for the services provided by the caretakers & catering staff in the corporate meeting rooms. The cost of providing these facilities and services is borne by the administrative buildings revenue budget.

4.12 Land & Property Team (Resources) provides overall management of rooms, liaising with other key departments and manage the necessary revenue budgets for caretaking, cleaning and ongoing maintenance of building fabric, decoration, fixtures and fittings, furniture and equipment.

Billingham Council Offices

4.13 No individual department is recharged any accommodation charge/rent for the floor space taken up by the Council Chamber in Billingham Council Offices. The floor area of this room is 105.93 m², and the approximate cost of the accommodation recharge for the room would normally be in the region of £14,200 per annum. This charge is borne by the "corporate centre" i.e. the administrative buildings revenue budget. Similarly, users of the meeting facilities are not charged any room hire fees.

4.14 Caretakers (Community Protection, Service Stockton) inspect and maintain the room on Tuesdays and Thursdays when they visit Billingham as part of their

duties. They ensure room layout is maintained, and they report any building problems or management issues to the correct persons.

4.15 Administration Services (Resources) manages the booking system by receiving telephone calls from staff and Members or bookings obtained via the calendar application in MS Outlook.

4.16 Land & Property Team (Resources) provides overall management of room, liaising with other key departments and manage the necessary revenue budgets for caretaking, cleaning and ongoing maintenance of building fabric, decoration, fixtures and fittings, furniture and equipment.

4.17 Technical Services (Development & Neighbourhood Services) ensure heating system is maintained and operational when meetings are to take place on out-of-hours basis.

Stockton Town Hall

4.18 The accommodation charge for Committee Rooms 1 and 2 in Stockton Town Hall is borne by the “corporate centre” i.e. the administrative buildings revenue budget. Similarly, internal users of these meeting facilities are not charged any room hire fees. The approximate cost of the accommodation recharge for these two rooms would normally be in the region of £14,600 per annum. As the Council Chamber and ground floor recreation room are used primarily in support of that service and function, Democratic Services is charged the annual accommodation charge/rent for the rooms amounting to approximately £13,500 and £5,000 per annum respectively.

4.19 Housekeepers (Community Protection, Service Stockton) provide operational service and are present whenever the building is opened for functions and events, and for meetings on a day-to-day basis. The housekeepers perform all catering and cleaning services, and are based in the ground floor kitchen. They are responsible for ensuring hot beverages and food is provided when requested. They are also responsible for clearing all used beverage equipment and crockery following meetings, ensuring room layouts are maintained and ensuring all rooms are left in a clean and tidy manner between meetings. The housekeepers also report any problems relating to the building fabric, heating, lighting, etc, to the correct persons and raise any building management issues that may arise.

4.20 Caretakers (from Community Protection, Service Stockton) provide staffing cover for housekeepers when they are not available. They inspect and maintain the rooms whenever they are present at the Town Hall. They ensure each room layout is maintained, and they report any building problems or management issues to the correct persons. The annual cost of providing water and cups to the meeting rooms in the Town Hall is approx £600 per annum.

4.21 Administration Services (Resources) manages the booking system by receiving telephone calls from staff and Members or bookings obtained via the calendar application in MS Outlook.

4.22 Land & Property Team (Resources) provides overall management of room, liaising with other key departments and manage the necessary revenue budgets for caretaking, cleaning and ongoing maintenance of building fabric, decoration, fixtures and fittings, furniture and equipment.

Technical Services (Development & Neighbourhood Services) ensure heating system is maintained and operational when meetings are to take place on out-of-hours basis.

Operational Meeting Facilities – Management Issues

4.23 Operational meeting rooms are likely to be found in some form in most Council-owned premises and have been set up by individual services and departments, in support of their day-to-day operations and service plan. They are often used on an ad-hoc and pre-planned basis, for team and project meetings, for meeting clients and other services, training, conducting interviews, presentations, workshops, etc. Primarily officers use these meeting rooms as part of their daily activities.

4.24 They vary in size and capacity, from small meeting rooms that can hold only 4-6 persons, to larger meeting facilities that can accommodate over 50 persons. The meeting rooms form part of any overall space requirement that particular service has, and therefore they are charged a rent/service charge for space they occupy via the accommodation recharge system. The accommodation charge is an annual “rent” based on the floor area of the room. In the Council’s administrative buildings alone, operational meeting rooms comprise of approx. 732 m² of space, and this equates to over £98,000 of accommodation recharge.

4.25 Most internal users of these meeting facilities are not charged any room hire fees although priority is often given to staff belonging to the “owning” service. It is entirely at the discretion of Heads of Service and their staff as to whether other services and departments are allowed to use these meeting facilities, and/or whether room hire fees are applicable.

4.26 Staff belonging to individual services and departments often provide a booking service and ensure the room is fit-for-use on a day-to-day basis. They are responsible for ensuring hot beverages and food is provided when requested. They are also responsible for clearing all used beverage equipment and crockery following meetings, ensuring room layouts are maintained and ensuring all rooms are left in a clean and tidy manner between meetings.

4.27 Staff report any problems relating to the building fabric, heating, lighting, etc, to the correct persons and raise any building management issues that may arise, although the ongoing maintenance of decoration, fixtures and fittings, furniture and equipment, and replacement of ICT and presentation equipment is the responsibility of individual services. Finally, it is at the discretion of Heads of Services as to whether the meeting facility contains a supply of hot beverages and water coolers for use by meeting attendees, and whether the cost for the use of these facilities is recharged.

4.28 If all meeting rooms throughout the Council’s property portfolio were to become classed as a corporate facility, there would be a significant shortfall in both accommodation recharges and necessary financial and personnel resources required to maintain and manage all rooms to an acceptable standard.

Audit of Meeting Venues

4.29 As part of the evidence gathering for the review, officers compiled a schedule of all of the Council’s corporate and operational meeting venues, including meeting rooms under the responsibility of Tees Active and Community Centres.

The same exercise was also undertaken in relation to a selection of external meeting venues regularly used by the Council.

4.30 The Committee felt that the information compiled was a valuable resource and would help officers in finding alternative operational meeting venues when corporate venues were unavailable or where there might be specific requirements for a meeting. This information could then be made widely available on the Council's intranet.

Staff Consultation

Feedback from officers responsible for the management of operational meeting venues

4.31 Views were sought from officers responsible for the management of operational meeting venues on the scope to release departmental meeting venues for use by other services and whether Democratic Services, the operations of CMT and the business of elected Members should have priority over operational requirements when corporate meeting facilities were not available.

4.32 Most officers were comfortable with opening up use of operational meeting venues to other services (a flexible approach was already exercised in respect of a number of venues) although it was felt that this should not be extended to outside organisations owing to security issues. It was stressed that the room would need to be left in the same condition as it was found.

4.33 Some commented that a number of the operational meeting venues were required at short notice by the service and would not want the rooms to be booked up by other services. In addition, some of the rooms were not accessible for disabled users as there was no lift within the building.

4.44 Given the comments received, the Committee felt that services should be able to continue to exercise discretion in releasing operational meeting rooms to other services. However, the Committee felt that information on operational meeting venues should be publicised on the Council's intranet so that officers were more aware of alternative meeting rooms and could approach the service concerned if there were experiencing difficulties in finding suitable accommodation for meetings. It was hoped that this would also help to reduce reliance on external meeting facilities.

Feedback from Democratic Services Officers

4.45 As organisers of Council and Committee Meeting as well as a range of other meetings, Democratic Services staff were asked for their general views on meeting venues and facilities. Feedback is summarised as follows:

- There is a shortage of meeting venues in general and the lack of a large Council venue suitable for big events
- Acoustics in the Upper Hall at the Tabernacle are particularly poor
- If departmental meeting rooms are used for committee meetings etc, they would need to be suitable for public access (including door entry)
- There are inconsistent booking arrangements – the library is on the Outlook system but cannot be booked in this way

- Equipment provided has improved – ideally bulky equipment should be available in venues to avoid transportation problems
- Information displayed in meeting rooms should be reviewed – some info is out of date - are we missing an opportunity here?
- Could consider installing a flat screen TV in Municipal Buildings and Town Hall to list meetings taking place and other information

Conference Calling and Video Calling

4.46 The Committee noted that Conference Calling through the Council's existing phone system provided an alternative to holding a meeting in a conference room and concluded that the use of conference calling should be promoted for smaller meetings thereby reducing pressure on meetings venues. The Committee also acknowledged that this would reduce unnecessary travelling time and car journeys and support the valuable work being undertaken by the Council as part of the Workplace Travel Plan Review.

4.47 The planned upgrade to the telephone system in March also created the opportunity for the Council to roll-out a video calling service internal to the Authority. In its basic form, this is point to point video calls between two people using existing phones (not video conferencing which would still require a meeting room facility). To allow more than two callers i.e. a video conference call, new infrastructure would be required at the core of the telephone system. Once the upgrade is in place, ICT will begin promoting the point to point service following a successful trial. Once this is accepted practice, the Council can investigate the multiple call system, but this obviously would require some form of funding.

Accessibility of Meeting Venues

4.48 Select Committee Members volunteered to undertake site visits to a selection of meeting venues with a member of the Stockton Disability Advisory Group. At each site visit, a checklist was completed with Members' observations on each venue with particular reference to accessibility issues. The following venues were visited:

Corporate Venues:

Municipal Buildings Conference Facilities
Town Hall Meeting Rooms
Stockton Library Lecture Hall
Billingham Council Chamber

Other Council Venues:

Castlegate Quay (Tees Active)
Education Centre

Community Centres:

Elmtree Centre

External Venues:

Destiny Centre

4.49 In addition, Select Committee Members were invited to complete the checklist for other meeting venues where they were attending meetings individually. Feedback was received in respect of Stockton Business Centre, Newtown Resource Centre and the Education Centre.

4.50 The Committee found that the quality and accessibility of the facilities varied from venue to venue but that there were specific problems associated with most of the meeting venues visited and improvements which could be made.

4.51 The Committee acknowledged that, although, the visits had been a useful exercise in highlighting the type of problems encountered by disabled people, they were not a substitute for a specialist audit of the facilities. The Committee were advised that full access audits were being undertaken of the Council's buildings and that this would include all internal meeting rooms. The audit was due to be completed by the end of 2007.

4.52 One area of concern which arose from the site visits, was the evacuation arrangements for disabled people unable to use stairs in the event of an emergency. The Committee noted that because the Municipal Buildings did not benefit from the provision of specialist evacuation chairs, the conference rooms on the first and second floors were not suitable for use by disabled visitors unable to use the stairs. The Committee were concerned that staff should be fully aware of this and that emergency evacuation arrangements from all of the Council's buildings be reviewed as a matter of urgency.

Costs of External Room Hire and Internal Meeting Facilities

External Venues

4.53 A summary of costs spent on external conference facilities during April – December 2006 is set out below:

Arc	£48.00
Bannatyne Fitness Ltd	£902.00
Stockton Baptist Tabernacle	£9,724.49
David Lloyd	£5,102.08
Masai Mara	£1,558.30
Oakwood Centre	£26,317.50
Swallow Hotel	£2,755.32
Teesside International City Church (Destiny)	£475.00
Wynyrd Services Ltd (Samsung)	£11,854.98
Total	£58,737.67

4.54 It should be noted that a significant proportion of these costs appeared to relate to large scale events.

4.55 The Committee noted that the Council did not have a large events venue which explained why there was a reliance on external venues for large events.

Premises Costs for Stockton Town Hall

4.56 The following breakdown sets out the costs and charges relating to non-domestic rates, utilities bills, caretaking and cleaning, security, repairs and maintenance, equipment and supplies etc. for the Town Hall.

2004/05 - £43,685
2005/06 - £49,256
2006/07 - £46,789 (expected outturn)

4.57 The cost to the Council of other internal meeting facilities are difficult to quantify as they are included within the overall costs and charges for Council premises.

5.0 Conclusion

5.1 The Committee found that usage of corporate meeting facilities was at capacity and that there was regular use of external meeting venues. After consulting with officers responsible for the management of operational meeting venues, the Committee felt that services should be able to continue to exercise discretion in releasing operational meeting rooms to other services. However, the Committee felt that information on operational meeting venues should be publicised on the Council's intranet so that officers were more aware of alternative meeting rooms and could approach the service concerned if there were experiencing difficulties in finding suitable accommodation for meetings.

5.2 The Committee felt that the information compiled on internal and external meeting venues was a valuable resource and would help officers in finding alternative meeting venues where corporate venues were unavailable or where there might be specific requirements for a meeting.

5.3 The Committee noted that Conference Calling through the Council's existing phone system provided an alternative to holding a meeting in a conference room. The Committee also acknowledged that this would reduce unnecessary travelling time and car journeys and support the valuable work being undertaken by the Council as part of the Workplace Travel Plan Review.

5.4 As a result of site visits to meeting venues, the Committee found that the quality and accessibility of the facilities varied from venue to venue but that there were specific problems associated with most of the meeting venues visited and improvements which could be made.

5.5 The Committee acknowledged that, although, the visits had been a useful exercise in highlighting the type of problems encountered by disabled people, they were not a substitute for a specialist audit of the facilities. The Committee were advised that full access audits were being undertaken of the Council's buildings and that this would include all internal meeting rooms. The audit was due to be completed by the end of 2007.

5.6 One area of concern which arose from the site visits was the evacuation arrangements for disabled people unable to use stairs in the event of an emergency. The Committee felt that this issue should be reviewed as a matter of urgency.

6.0 Recommendations

That:

- (1) detailed information on all Council meeting venues and a range of external venues (previously used by the Council) be provided on the Council's intranet to enable officers to make informed judgements on the best choice of meeting venue and that the information provided include:
 - facilities and equipment available
 - occupancy
 - barriers to access where known
 - cost
 - arrangements for getting to the venue by public transport
 - distance from Stockton Town Centre
 - booking arrangements
 - whether Fairtrade refreshments are available
- (2) when calling meetings involving external invitees and Members, meeting organisers be asked to include information in a standardised format on the front page of meeting invitations directing those invited to where they can find further information on how to access the meeting venue, including parking and travelling arrangements and public transport and who to contact to discuss any access needs;
- (3) that officers be encouraged to make full use of suitable internal meeting venues available before booking external venues;
- (4) that operational Meeting Rooms not currently on the Council's outlook system be added for ease of booking;
- (5) the use of telephone conference calling be promoted for smaller meetings in order to reduce the pressure on conference facilities, unnecessary travelling and car journeys and, subject to available resources, the use of video calling be considered as a further alternative;
- (6) emergency evacuation arrangements from the Council's buildings be reviewed as a matter of urgency;
- (7) the wording of the Council's Conference Room Guide and meeting room confirmations be revised to stress that evacuation in an emergency is the responsibility of the meeting organiser and that a full risk assessment must be undertaken before knowingly inviting any member of the public or disabled person to a meeting in Council premises and reasonable adjustments made to conform with Disability Discrimination Act requirements where possible.