

Community Buildings Consultation – Frequently Asked Questions

Frequently asked questions

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What is a community hub?

The council's proposal for community hubs is to provide multi-use spaces, primarily for voluntary and community organisations, in premises that are accessible, high quality and versatile and available for short- and long-term hire throughout the week on an affordable basis.

What sort of space will be available in a community hub?

Ideally community hubs will include spaces that can be hired on an hourly basis (e.g. meeting rooms, community halls, activity space, board rooms) as well as spaces that can be rented on a longer-term basis (accommodation or office space for local voluntary and community sector organisations that require a longer-term base). They should be equipped with free wi-fi where possible.

Each community hub will be different, and will vary in response to local requirements and needs. Larger community hubs could accommodate a number of different activities at the same time, allowing for the possibility of different organisations delivering activities at the same time (e.g. in adjoining spaces). There should also be secure lockable storage for organisations that might use the spaces on a regular basis.

In terms of specific spaces within the hubs, there may be a large hall or meeting space, capable of hosting large meetings and conference style events as well as birthday parties and wedding receptions and similar functions. This may be accompanied by a small kitchenette or, where possible, a small catering kitchen.

In addition, there may be smaller meeting rooms (capable of accommodating 10-12 people) for meetings, training sessions, board/management committee meetings of local groups. These should have multimedia facilities, including internet access and the requisite IT equipment.

Smaller community hubs may only be able to accommodate some of these facilities. However each hub will be designed with existing local provision in mind – if there is a shortage of or demand for a particular type of space, then the council would seek to fill that gap.

Who are community hubs for?

New and existing voluntary and community groups are the key target users. This includes both groups who need a longer-term base, whether office space or space to deliver services to the public, and are prepared to enter into a lease or licence arrangement, and also groups who may wish to hire a hall or meeting space on an hourly basis – either ad hoc or as a regular booking. This might include TRAs or local clubs who only need to meet on a weekly or monthly basis.

The council will give priority to existing tenants in community buildings that are poorly utilised and/or in poor condition and, for meetings, where space for these is available, to local voluntary and community groups and organisations. Following the outcome of this consultation exercise and the consideration of the Cabinet report in October, the council will talk to these groups about how they might be able to use the new community hub in their area. Once these groups have been accommodated, the additional spaces will be offered to other community groups who might be seeking premises from which to deliver services in the borough.

When it comes to allocating hired space in a community hub, local voluntary and community groups will be prioritised over private functions and requests for bookings from private sector organisations. For local voluntary and community groups, bookings will be on a first come, first served basis, although it may be that priority is given to longer-term use over one-off bookings.

Where will these hubs be?

The council will look at ensuring there is a hub within relatively short walking distance of most parts of the borough. They will mostly be in existing buildings. Examples for where the first hubs might be located include the Christian Street Community Centre, E1, and the community building on the St Andrew's development in Bromley-by-Bow. The council is actively looking for other potential hub sites in the borough. This could be an existing building that would be converted to a hub or, in limited cases, a development opportunity that will allow the delivery of a hub by either building one or securing one via the planning process in areas where existing options are limited.

Decisions on where hubs should be will be taken on the basis of local need, and in consultation with the voluntary and community sector; this will include consideration of all community facilities in the area, not just those owned by the council. It is important that you let us know where you would like to see these hubs. Please also let us know if you are aware of a building in your area that may be suitable for consideration.

How many hubs will there be?

The council does not have a fixed number of hubs it wishes to establish; hubs will be provided where there is a need for one. This will respond to local need and take into consideration existing community facilities in the area including the community facilities provided by other organisations such as housing associations and charities.

Who will run the community hubs?

They are going to be managed by the council initially, but in the future it may be appropriate for a community or voluntary organisation to manage them on the council's behalf.

When will community hubs be open?

It is assumed that these hubs will generally be open weekly from 9am to 5pm, with late sessions available if required. Depending on the location and any planning consents, these hours may vary.

How much will it cost to hire space in a community hub?

The charges for flexible spaces will be on an hourly basis and set on a cost recovery basis; this means the council will only charge community groups what it costs to run and manage the buildings. It may also be possible to offset additional costs by hiring rooms out to private organisations at a higher rate, therefore leading to a reduced hire charge for community groups. Based on charges by providers of similar facilities, it is anticipated that the average cost may be as follows:

Indicative figures only

Commercial Rate	Non-resident Rate	LBTH Resident Rate	Registered Charity Rate	LBTH Registered Charity Rate	Off Peak % discount Monday – Friday 9am – 5pm	Long term standard discount (booking in excess of 12 weeks)
£35 p/h	£25 p/h	£20 p/h	£15 p/h	£12.50 p/h	10%	20% discount

Based on these indicative figures, the lowest cost will be to a local charity/not-for-profit group who have a regular booking during off peak hours, for whom the charge would be £8.75 p/h. Please note that these are indicative figures only and may change once more detailed work has been carried out on the community buildings hub proposal.

What kind of agreements will hub users be on?

Voluntary and community groups who use a hub will be subject to a licence agreement. This gives them permission to use the spaces at certain times but allows the wider building to be shared with other groups. There will either be a rolling month-to-month licence (for longer-term use) or a simple hire agreement (for one-off or short-term use).

Will hub users have their own keys to the building?

The precise arrangement will vary between sites. Larger hub buildings will generally be opened and closed by the council, but longer-term tenants could also have independent access. Where there is secure lockable storage, users will be given keys to this. In the future, the council may seek voluntary or community sector organisations to manage the buildings on the council's behalf. Their role would be to facilitate the other users of the building.

What will happen to existing tenants in community buildings?

Existing tenants will either move to these new community hubs or be offered a lease on their existing premises. The council will look to accommodate tenants currently in buildings with low levels of utilisation or in poor condition in a hub. However, this is not a policy to drive organisations providing valuable services from their homes and is a process that will take place through dialogue and consultation. In all cases of groups moving from existing buildings to hubs, they will be in spaces that are affordable, of a higher quality and well managed. Where there is no suitable hub in the locality, the council may propose a lease instead, until such time that there is a hub in the area.

What is a lease?

A lease is a form of contract that relates to property. It creates a legal interest in the land/building and means the tenant has a legal right to the use of the property (in line with the terms of the lease) for the duration of the lease. The council can only break the lease in specific and limited circumstances and then only by following processes set out in the lease or in law. In contrast to the security offered by a lease, at present the vast majority of council-owned community buildings either have no formal agreement in place or are let on tenancies-at-will; these are tenancies that

can be ended at any point, simply by the council issuing a notice. They provide no protection or security to the tenant.

What kind of lease will be offered?

The council's standard lease for community buildings will be for a 3- to 5-year term and on a community rent - this is the rent for community use as assessed by a valuer. This will be excluded from the security provisions in the Landlord & Tenant Act; this means the tenant does not have an automatic right to renew the lease at the end of the 3- to 5-year term. In addition, the lease will be on an internal repairing basis; this means the tenant will be responsible for making sure the inside of the property is kept in good condition. It is anticipated that tenants may have to contribute towards the cost of statutory health and safety testing.

What if an organisation wants a longer lease?

The council will only consider requests for a longer lease in extremely limited circumstances. This is to ensure the council maintains some control over the longer-term use of the property for the benefit of the borough's residents. The council would normally only enter into a longer lease where this was required to secure significant funding. The council would need to receive confirmation of such funding. In all cases for longer leases, the rent under the long lease will be the open market rental value for community use.

What if an organisation wants a licence?

If a voluntary or community group is to be the sole occupier of a building, a lease is the only property agreement that the council can offer. In community hubs, a licence will be the norm. This will either be, for longer-term users, a rolling licence with a monthly fee or, for one-off or short-term use, a hire agreement.

Why will the council be charging rent?

The existing arrangements are haphazard and inconsistent. Some of them are historic, with no records of how they came to be and no agreement for how they are meant to operate. This means some organisations are paying no rent while others are paying the full community rent. The council is required to demonstrate how it satisfies its legal requirements and demonstrate continued compliance with its Best Value duty. There are also specific obligations that the council must meet in relation to property matters, set out in s123, Local Government Act 1972 and s30, Housing Act 1985. By starting from the position that all buildings occupiers should pay a rent, the council will ensure that all community groups are treated fairly and consistently, in a transparent and accountable manner and the council meets its legal obligations.

What is a community rent?

The term 'community rent' is used to describe the rent for the property following an assessment of the open market rental value for community use (within planning use class D1). This has the effect of restricting the rent as it is not for a commercial property such as an office and a shop. This will be approximately £14 per square foot.

However, most councils recognise that for voluntary and community organisations, operating on a limited budget, even a community rent can cause budget pressures. We are looking at various

models in which a rent is only charge to cover the council's costs; this would be in recognition of the activities carried out by a tenant and the community value of those activities. Many other councils appear to operate such a model. The council must also be satisfied that the model offers 'Best Value' too, and must also demonstrate this to the Commissioners. The development of community hubs forms part of the underlying thinking about this.

What if an organisation cannot afford the community rent being proposed?

The council recognises that many voluntary and community groups offer significant added community or social value to the borough, and that this should be recognised through a rent reduction.

The council intends to work with the voluntary and community sector to devise a clear set of criteria that organisations would need to meet in order to receive a rent reduction. These may include meeting governance and constitutional requirements, having clearly defined objectives and activities that support the council's strategic priorities, and meeting requirements regarding diversity and community cohesion. Voluntary and community sector organisations will be given the opportunity to apply for the rent reduction and if agreed this will apply for the period of the lease.

Certain types of organisations will not be eligible for a rent reduction. An example of where this might apply is with nurseries where the council needs to ensure it does not give an unfair and uncompetitive advantage to one organisation over another providing the same or similar services. In such cases the council would expect the rental costs to be included in the business plan for the organisation.

What if a voluntary or community group does not want to move from their existing premises?

Where a voluntary or community group is in a building that is not currently well utilised and/or is in poor condition, the council is likely to want to offer the group alternative space in a nearby hub. This will allow alternative uses to be considered for the existing building: this can include seeking a tenant who will increase the usage of the building, conversion to residential or other use, or explore redevelopment opportunities. In some cases, it will not be possible to comply with a group's desire to remain in their building but the council will try to accommodate requests where possible. In considering requests the council will take account of a building occupier's willingness to share its space with other community groups. However, this policy is not designed to force large scale relocations of well-settled and effective organisations fully using buildings for the community.

I belong to a voluntary or community group that is looking for accommodation. What will these proposals mean for us?

The creation of community hubs, and the push to increase the use of the existing buildings, means that there will be more spaces available for community groups as these proposals progress. The spaces in community hubs will be of a higher quality, more secure and more affordable than the existing estate. They will be marketed, let and allocated in a transparent and open manner.

What will happen to our Tenants and Residents Association's (TRAs) accommodation?

Some TRAs occupy non-residential premises, such as former washrooms or huts or stand-alone buildings. Where TRAs are based in converted flats, the council is likely to look to accommodate the TRA in other suitable premises, such as a hub, if there is one sufficiently nearby. This will release the flat to be converted back into housing for a family on the council's housing waiting list.

In some cases, the council will offer the TRA a lease on a peppercorn rent (usually £1 per year). This is because tenants already pay for the community facilities on the estate as their rent payments go towards the council's Housing Revenue Account (which paid for the facility for the local tenants) and to seek a market rent under the lease would be to double-charge for the facility. In such cases, the lease will set out the council's requirements of the TRA, including ensuring they are a recognised TRA; they have the appropriate governing arrangements in place; their responsibility to raise funds by hiring out the facility to local residents and other community groups; and accounting for the income through an agreed accounting protocol. In addition to raising funds for TRA activities, the income will contribute towards the repairs and maintenance of the property.