

Appendix A - Room Hire Policy Research on Current Practice

The following provides a summary overview of current practice across similar organisations to Mid Ulster District Council on the application of their room hire arrangements, with specific reference to the hire of rooms within civic offices paper and facilities across the district.

The table below details the results of a 'dip-sample' of the policy positions taken by some of the other Council's, within Northern Ireland.

Council	Understanding of policy position on accepting bookings for political orientated events
Ards & North Down BC	Bookings are accepted across their buildings and facilities with restrictions
Belfast CC	Two type of bookings exist within Belfast CC: (i) Commercial venues (i.e. the Ulster Hall and the Waterfront) and Council venues. (ii) Council Venues (i.e. offices): do not facilitate <i>'functions which have as their primary purpose the advancement of any political or religious cause or campaign or are otherwise potentially contentious or involve significant reputation risks for the council'</i>
Causeway Coast & Glens BC	Booking are accepted with restrictions
Derry City and Strabane DC	The Guildhall in Londonderry is the only space made available. Bookings for same are accepted with restrictions
Antrim & Newtownabbey BC	Booking are accepted with restrictions <i>'The council will not permit the display of flags and emblems associated with different cultures or religious beliefs by the organisation, group or individual or their associates in or around the room or location that they have hired for the event. Failure to comply with this condition will mean that hire of Council's facilities may be refused to the individual, group or organisation in the future'</i>
Newry, Mourne & Down DC	Booking are accepted with restrictions
Fermanagh & Omagh DC	Booking are accepted with restrictions

As part of research undertaken to inform a review of Council's policy Fermanagh & Omagh DC have shared research they had undertaken on same from 2019. In undertaking a similar exercise, Fermanagh & Omagh DC (FODC) had received advice in 2015 from John Kremer, Equality Consultancy Services:

- A blanket ban can be problematic
 - Any policy on such an issue should tie into the council's good relations strategy
 - Any policy allowing such use should be very specific - i.e. only for bone fide/constituted groups, upon receipt of an application form which is accepted.
 - Individual contracts should then be drawn up, with all contracts also complying with the council's good relations strategy as well as the Council's Section 75 obligations
 - As a result, each application to use a room/venue/facility should be assessed individually
- 1.1 Similar information was received by FODC from the Equality Commission. At that time the Commission noted that a 'blanket ban' may prove troublesome if an oversight by any Officer/facility manager occurs. However, if a policy allowing use is drawn up it may be worthwhile having some very 'set' guidelines which would be assessed on a case by case basis. The Commission also advised that going forward, it would be up to the Council to make the decision and for any policy to be screened for any possible mitigating circumstances.
- 1.2 The policies of councils in other jurisdictions have also been examined. The information from these councils demonstrate that policy positions vary from council to council however there is a general theme of their positions of accepting bookings with a caveat of restrictions. These restrictions are linked primarily to political use of venues.

Going Forward

- 1.3 Having examined common policy positions of local authorities, options to include in amending the policy could include restrictions for bookings of political and/or religious events. These restrictions could include and all of the below:
- Displaying of for example paraphernalia attached to the political party should only be displayed in the room hired and not in any public space (*flags would be prohibited under the current Council position on the flying/display of flags*)
 - Additional authorisation of these bookings
 - Limited numbers of buildings that can host these events

- Allow for limited range of events. For example, include party political events but not include events linked to elections and campaigning therefore separation of the types of meeting. For example;
 - Rooms and Venues being used for non-party political type meetings – for example a Ministerial Visit or an Information Event (i.e. an update to EU policy) being organised by a group of Councillors, Government Department, MP or MLA
 - Rooms and Venues being used for party political purposes, or on behalf of a political representative but not for but not for events linked to elections and campaigning

Democratic Services
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