Melton Borough Council's Children's and Community Centres

Outline Marketing Strategy, Competitor analysis and Electronic Booking System Analysis

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Croft Marketing & Event Management

Melton Borough Council's Children's and Community Centres

Contents

1.   Background

Melton Borough Council currently has three Sure Start Children's and Community Centres in Melton Mowbray consisting of:

> The Cove – Sysonby Street
> The Edge – Dalby Road
> Fairmead – Drummond Walk

The services, and facilities vary at the centres vary but they are used primarily for activities that benefit the local community including:

- Support for parents – including advice on parenting local child-care options and access to specialist services for families
- Health services- including health visitors services, new parent support, parent craft (antenatal classes) and speech & language therapy
- Customer services for MBC
- Library book loans (in the communities)
- Free courses including family learning, parenting, baby massage, first aid etc.
- Use by community groups (exercise classes, courses, drop in clinics etc)

1.1   Current Restrictions:

- There is caretaking cover for week bookings, but for weekend or bank holiday bookings caretaking cover needs to be organised ahead of a booking being placed.
- Rooms cannot be booked for political meetings or rallies (with the exception of being used as a polling station)
- Bookings must be made a minimum of one week in advance of the event, and in the case of one off bookings full payment must be made at that time.
- If the hirer cancels their booking within one week of the hire date, the full hire fee must still be paid.
- The facilities can be hired from 8.30am to 11pm (weekdays) with additional hours possible during weekends, subject to caretaking cover.
- The facilities may not be used to promote gambling or other form of lottery except such lottery as is deemed lawful by virtue of any enactment relating to gambling, betting and lotteries,
- With the exception of assistance dogs, no animals are allowed on the premises.

1.2   Health and Safety and Legislative Requirements:

- As with all public spaces, the hirer needs to ensure they have adequate first aid cover (a nominated first aider) and that they are aware of the location of the first aid box.
- The consumption of or sale of alcohol on the premises requires the prior approval of the management committee and if acceptable a suitable licence (Temporary Event Notice) must be obtained.
- There are strict limits of the number of people allowed in any room at one time, and these limits must be adhered to on health and safety grounds.
- For activities involving children, the 'in charge' adults must have current CRB/DBS checks.
- There must always be a responsible adult (over 18) present at all times.

- The facilities are all no-smoking.
- The hirer must not interfere with fire doors and doors fitted with automatic enclosures, and must keep every corridor, passage and exit of the premises clear of obstruction and clear for use in the event of an emergency. The hirer must familiarise themselves with the emergency exit routes at the start of their events.
- Any electrical equipment brought on site (which must be approved in advance by centre staff) must be fit for purpose and display an up-to-date PAT test label (where applicable) and must be used only for the purposes for which it is intended.
- For certain activities, the hirer may be asked to provide evidence of appropriate Public Liability Insurance.
- All users must ensure they have the correct licences in place relating to the sale of alcohol, playing of music, singing, dancing and/or stage plays and if in doubt should ask the centre staff for details upon booking.
- The hirer must undertake their own risk assessments for any activity taking place, and staff at the centres may ask for evidence of these assessments.

1.3 Electronic Booking System

The room booking system for the facilities is currently managed via an excel spreadsheet which shows for each day the three facilities, the rooms within the facilities, and bookings based on half hour bookings. This is currently managed by a team of people, each of whom has access to the system and can book, alter and cancel room bookings. The main limitations of this system include:

- It is time consuming to input bookings – particularly repeat bookings which all need to be individually manually input
- It does not allow for integration with other systems, i.e. finance, invoicing, booking confirmation etc
- Due to the high level of manual input, it is open to human error and duplicate bookings/cancellation errors are likely
- The system is not visible to a wider audience and therefore more time is required for checking/confirming bookings via the booking staff
- Cancellation of forward bookings is cumbersome, with each individual booking having to be manually deleted – both time consuming and open to human error i.e. the wrong bookings are deleted

2. Aims of this project

Whilst use of the facilities during the day is currently fairly busy in certain areas, more needs to be done to promote the facilities to a wider audience to ensure that the local community are aware of both the facilities and the services they offer, and also to increase the revenue gained through increased bookings for non community based events. The current booking system is extremely labour intensive, and is not sophisticated enough to handle the bookings, their requirements and invoicing in a cost effective way.

This project therefore has two key aims. The first is to establish an outline marketing strategy aimed at increasing the awareness of the availability of the facilities and services to local community groups and local residents.

Secondly, it will look into the system requirements for an integrated IT system (to be built in-house by MBC's IT contractors) to reduce the time required to maintain the booking system.

The system should be integrated with other MBC services, whilst also enabling it to be viewable by a wider audience (potentially publicly via the website) to again reduce the time required for the booking staff to investigate availability.

3.   Competitor and Pricing Analysis

The facilities are currently hired out on two different levels – a community hire rate and a commercial rate. The community hire rate equates to 50% of the commercial hire rate. Those applicable for the 50% discount include community groups, voluntary organisations and charities.   All commercial users (including private functions) are charged out at the fully commercial rate.

The current commercial hire rate is £20 for one hour, £30 for up to 2 hours, £50 for 4 hours and £100 for over 4 hours. To give an idea of how competitive/commercial these rates are, I have undertaken a brief analysis of a number of community centres, village halls, and church facilities in and around the Melton region, see Appendix A.   From those which I have managed to obtain up-to-date prices (I will forward on any additional prices I receive after submitting this report) either via the website research or via a personal discussion, I have established that the current average prices charged are:

- Daily average hourly charge = £14.78
- Average charge for an evening event from 5pm to 11pm = £64.50

Many of these facilities have the same features as those offered by the Sure Start community Centres, and some have additional facilities including extensive outdoor space, additional on-site car parking facilities, and additional services such as free set up, tea and coffee for organisers, and full a/v systems.

From this analysis, albeit on a relatively small sample of comparable facilities, it is apparent that the current charges are slightly higher than the competition, but given their location within the communities they serve, and the standard of facilities available, in my opinion they are fairly priced.

4.   Outline Marketing Strategy

The following provides a brief overview of the basic marketing strategy that I would suggest implementing to improve the awareness of the facilities amongst the local community as well as community groups.   Due to the nature of the facilities, I do not feel that it would be appropriate to promote them to the wider commercial sector, but this could be considered at a later date.

4.1 Existing Web Presence

I will start with a quick analysis of the way the facilities are currently promoted via the main MBC web site, suggesting ways in which this could be improved to increase awareness amongst the main user groups i.e. members of the local community.

There are pages within the Melton Borough Council website that provide information on the three centres*, primarily focussing on the services that they offer i.e. support for children and young families. The current structure requires visitors to do quite a bit of digging to find

out that the facilities can be hired to individuals, and even then it is not that clear what type of activities they are more suited to.

(*Note – The Edge is referred to as Dalby Road Sure Start Centre on some pages and The Edge Sure Start Centre on others and for consistency each reference should be changed to The Edge. Also, the link to this facility on the Cove Page http://www.melton.gov.uk/community_and_living/childrens_centres__facilitie/the_cove.aspx is currently broken.)

To arrive at the page that indicates that the facilities are available for hire you have to currently go through six clicks:

- Meton Borough Council
   - Community and Living
     - Community Facilities
       - Children's Centres and Facilities
         - You then have to click onto one of the three facilities
           - You then arrive at a page with a link 'Available to Hire'

The route is quite complicated and likely to confuse visitors at various stages. For instance, if you were looking to hire the facilities for a private party, would you really click on 'community and living' on the home page of the website? Even if you did, would you then click on 'children's centres and facilities' if the party were not a children's party?

It would simplify things for visitors, and ensure that they are more widely exposed to these facilities, if '**Community Centre Hire'** could be visible directly on the home page, i.e. under Council Services (*suggested url www.melton.gov.uk/community_centre_hire*). This would take visitors to the web-site directly to a page that explains that the facilities are available to hire for a number of events (with restrictions). This page needs to be amended to clearly state what the facilities are available for, as at present it is very much focussed on the children and early years support. Whilst this is of course the main focus of the facilities, visitors need to be aware that they can hire the facilities for a range of events from birthday parties (young and old), family occasions and social events (ideally free of charge i.e. non commercial social events). Appendix B shows suggested modified text for this page together with a suggested simplified web structure to ease visitor navigation.

For each of three centres, the current content should be modified to include:

- A profile of each centre with a summary of the facilities and services available, location maps and contact details
- Room details and capacities (and restrictions if applicable)
- Details of any equipment that is available either free of charge or for hire
- Details of any community bookings that are open to the public including location, timing and contact details
- Details of any additional facilities available i.e. kitchen facilities, disabled facilities, car parking (or nearest car parking)
- Availability (if possible – via the new room booking system being implemented)
- Visuals of all the main facilities set up for various different events (with prior permission from the hirer)

- Charges outlining the special rates available to community/charitable groups, and also including what is, and indeed is not, included within the costs
- Limitations of use – to reduce time spend on enquiries from clients for whom the facilities would not be suitable, thereby reducing administration time spent answering unsuitable enquiries.

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The above content, together with the simplified web structure, should make it far easier for visitors to not only find the facilities, but to identify if they are indeed appropriate for their proposed event thereby increasing potential bookings, whilst also reducing input required from the administrative team.

4.2   Marketing Campaign

Once the website/pages are up and running, and ideally a more sophisticated booking system is installed, tested and implemented, a marketing campaign should be rolled out. It is important that the campaign is both cost and time effective and the activities I propose below enable content for one campaign (i.e. a press release) to be recycled for another activity (such as the bi-monthly newsletter) thereby minimising the input required from the administrative team.   Other interested parties (i.e. community groups) should also be encouraged to provide material for the marketing activities that not only reduces input required by MBC staff, but also offers the community groups support with their marketing, and enables to become deeper integrated within the community centres.

The following outlines the key activities I would recommend for each specific market sector:

4.2.1   Local Community

The proposed new web structure, and in particular a presence on the home page of the MBC website, should increase the overall awareness of the centre, but for those who are not often on-line, or indeed do not have access to the Internet, more traditional marketing needs to be undertaken.

Any marketing should focus on the free services the centres have to offer (as this is the main function of the facilities) as well as promoting the facilities for private functions that will ultimately increase the revenue and help the centres to become self-sustaining.

Local community marketing could include the following:

- **Promotional Material -** The centres are by their very nature ideally located within the communities which they serve, and the centres themselves provide the ideal place for initial promotion via notice boards at the centres as well as local notice boards/information points in local shops, churches, doctors and dentist clinics etc. For these facilities, posters and a small flyer that is updated on a bi-monthly basis should be established to ensure that the community are kept up-to-date with any new services/facilities that are available, as well as to maintain interest in the longer term.

- **Open days** (promoted via the above activity) - each centre could be opened up say twice a year for half a day and the local community invited in to see what the centre has to offer from both a free basis (services delivered at the centre) and as a local

resource which they can hire for personal use. A series of activities could be undertaken to enable the local community to see at first hand the type of services that are available, as well as seeing the facilities in use.

- **General Advertising** – to wide the scope of the facilities, regular articles focussing on the community services the centres offer, should be placed with the local media. Given the main function of the facilities is to benefit the community, the articles should focus on the services being offered and as such should be on either a free basis, or on an advertorial basis thereby minimising costs.

- **Social Media –** one of the most immediate and cost effective ways of promoting the facilities, and getting directly to members of the community, would be by setting up a facebook page (or pages for the individual facilities) if not already set up (I could not find one?). The pages would need to be updated regularly (several times a week) with news stories relating to not only the facilities themselves, but also other related services that are offered by either the local council (events taking place, new services being launched) and indeed other community groups with whom the Council interact.

4.2.2. Community Groups

Whilst the facilities are currently used by a number of community groups and clinics, more needs to be done to ensure that all groups and individuals within the communities around the centres are fully aware of the facilities, and their availability. The marketing campaign for this sector should include:

- **Website presence -** A specific page should be set up under Community and Living called **Community Centre Facilities** (an update of the current Sure Start page) focussing on community groups and how they can use the facilities. This could be expanded to include details of all the current events that are being run in the various community centres that are open to members of the public, as well as case studies of how current community groups use the facilities to encourage others to follow their suit.

- **Advertising** – advertisements, advertorials or editorial features should be placed in the local press focussing on the facilities and the ways in which they are currently being used. Case studies should be used to gain free editorial coverage in the local press and are a great way of supporting the local community groups in maximising their exposure.

- **Press releases** - to be sent to the local press , each to be based around a particular story such as a new service being offered, a recent successful event held etc. which will not only help promote the centre, but will also help increase awareness of the specific community group being featured.

- **Direct Marketing** - for the community groups, e-mail addresses should be obtained for key contacts, and these can then be used for direct marketing via a system such as mailchimp (see www.mailchimp.com). A free to use service, Mailchimp allows a non-designer to put together a professional e-shot, newsletter, flyer or brochure, which can then be sent to all contacts. This enables regular contact to be maintained with a large number of contacts with minimal time and costs incurred.

The content created (for example I would suggest a bi-monthly newsletter – consisting of a simple A4 page format) could then be converted into a pdf file and loaded onto the website pages enabling general visitors to download and keep up-to-date with the latest developments.

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4.2.3. Charity Events

It would also be good PR (and particularly help with the MBC's corporate social responsibility) to host a series of charity events (and not forgetting that those attending will get to see the premises and knock on business is inevitable).   For this sector, I would propose that a database of local charities is established, with a special offer (to be agreed) put together specifically targeted at this sector.   It would of course be important to ensure that these events covered their costs (including any staffing required particularly for out of hours events such as caretaking) but they should also be considered as a promotional vehicle themselves ultimately leading to an increase in private event hire business.

5.   Electronic Booking System Reporting and Analysis

Having discussed the room booking system with members of the administrative team, and having been provided with copies of the existing excel spreadsheets, it is apparent that the current booking system has a number of flaws:

- is time consuming to enter or alter bookings with each individual booking having to be input separately
- as such it is open to human error with forward bookings being missed/inserted into the wrong dates, the wrong bookings cancelled etc.
- it is not visible to the general public , and therefore those wishing to book the facilities have to discuss the bookings with the administrative team directly, thereby incurring further administrative time
- as a stand alone system it does not allow any integration with other back office systems (accounts, finance, caretaking etc).
- It does not allow for any analysis of the facilities utilisation to be undertaken other than time intensive manual work

To overcome these issues, and to provide a system that is able to provide the management team with real-time analysis of the utilisation of each centre, and indeed each individual room within the centre, a far more sophisticated system needs to be installed.

5.1   Off the shelf Room Booking Systems

There are a number of off-the-shelf systems that are available, but Council restrictions (i.e. the system needs to be managed on the council servers rather than be a web- based system) will not allow for their implementation.   Also, the complexity of some of the software solutions would mean a significant learning curve for the administrative team, with the functionality far exceeding the Council's requirements.

They do however give a good starting point as to what could/should be included within the system, and I have therefore undertaken an analysis of a number of the leading off the shelf package to identify the key features within each that could be incorporated into a bespoke system built by MBC's main IT contractor.   The systems I have analysed include:

www.roombookingsystem.co.uk
www.condecosoftware.com
www.bookmeetingroom.com
and
www.scheduleit.co.uk

It is important that the system that is built is user friendly (i.e. it does not require extensive training) is easy to use from both the administrator and the potential customers' point of view. It must also provide all information that would be required of the administration team to ensure they can fulfil the booking requirement, and provide management with the analysis required for reporting purposes.

5.1.1   Key features

Having analysed the current off-the-shelf systems available, and discussed the system requirements with the administrative team, the following are the key features that I would recommend are included within the proposed new bespoke electronic booking system:

Data entry and viewing

- Ability to view resource availability and bookings by day, week or by individual community centre
- Simple data entry, i.e. click on a particular time within a resource and enter data which once confirmed/saved shows on all systems (i.e. real time data entry)
- Colour coding of bookings (pre-natal, community groups, private individuals etc)
- Recurring bookings entered automatically i.e. weekly for the next four weeks, every fortnight, with the ability for conflicts to be identified and suitable alternative facilities suggested
- The ability to cancel recurring bookings in one go, but to cancel only one in a series if necessary i.e. a booking for the next six weeks may want to cancel one booking only in the middle of the period
- The ability to put restrictions on bookings i.e. rooms can only be booked with 24 hour notice, out of hours bookings can only be booked once caretaker is confirmed, private bookings have separate area for private data (see below)
- Contact details for customers including name, organisation (if applicable) telephone number and e-mail address to be recorded as a minimum although not widely visible to the public. For public view, details of public events should be visible, i.e. contact details for the Messy Play Group, but for private bookings, the facility should simply show as booked with the meeting notes containing all the relevant data that is protected by the data protection and is only visible to the administration staff (or those given administrative rights)
- Booking notes – the ability to attach notes to a specific booking with unlimited fields, visible by all interested user groups (but not genera public) i.e. special requirements such as out of hours caretaking
- The ability to directly e-mail from a booking with the booking information automatically entered – useful for confirming bookings, modifying bookings, invoicing etc
- The ability to attach documents to a specific booking – agendas, method statements, risk assessments, notes for caretaking staff etc.
- Remote access (web based viewing for potential customers/interested parties beyond those with administrative rights)

- System restrictions i.e. certain people can view, book, modify, delete bookings whilst others (particularly user groups) can only view details
- Quick editing – i.e. if a customer wishes to change a time/date for the same booking the administrative team need the ability to simply change the time/date and the information and any attachments will be automatically transferred
- Ability to have resources for each facility available i.e. if you click on The Cove, Hall 1 it will tell you the maximum capacity and any restrictions relating to that facility

Reporting and Analysis

- Report generation – the ability to generate reports that will provide an analysis of room bookings such as busiest rooms, busiest periods, most income generated (by room or by centre) number of bookings made per day by centre etc.
- Report showing list of all bookings by a date range (i.e. all bookings for the next week) showing customer contact, the facility being used, resource requirements and income
- A helpdesk facility (to the internal IT company) allowing administrative users to send tickets highlighting any issues with the system
- Printable booking sheet showing for each booking the customer, their contact details, start and end times, special requirements and any charges to be incurred

5.2   Recommendations

Prior to any further work being undertaken on the proposed system, I would recommend that the administrative team are consulted on the above, as there could well be additional features that would like to see included to reduce their overall time input, and indeed as the main users of the system they are likely to have identified additional flaws in the existing system.   There may also be features listed above that exceed your current requirements, and would simply be adding to the complexity of any system built.

A starting point could be to provide the administrative team with access to a couple of the current off-the-shelf systems (named above) to enable them to trial them (not necessarily for public access) to enable them to identify which of the features they feel would be beneficial to them.

I would recommend that a working team is then put together consisting of representatives from the administrative team, the management team and the IT consultants to enable a detailed system specification to be developed from which the IT consultants can then build, test, and implement a bespoke electronic booking system for the management of the facilities at the Council's Children's and Community Centres.

Appendix A

Community Centres, Village Halls and Church Facilities in the Melton Region

Appendix B

Suggested modified content (not design) for Community Centre Hire
Suggested url: www.melton.gov.uk/community_centre_hire
together with a suggested simplified web structure

Community Centre Hire

Whilst you may be aware that the centre in your community provides a range of facilities and services for children and young families, you may not be aware that they are also available for general hire from 8am to 10pm 7 days a week (subject to availability) by private individuals. Being based within the communities, the facilities are ideal for family occasions such as birthday parties (young and old), anniversaries, and family social gatherings.   As well as an early year's education area, an enclosed outside play space, reception, kitchen, consultation room, each facility has at least one community hall ideal for family gatherings.

Please note: Rooms cannot be let for political meetings or rallies, with the exception of usage as a polling station.

The Cove *(make this a link to the main Cove page)*

The Cove Sure Start Children's and Community Centre
Sysonby Street
Melton Mowbray
Leicestershire
LE13 0LP

The COVE consists of two main halls for large group activities for up to 60 people seated, one on the ground floor and one on the first floor, with disabled & child friendly access to both floors via lift. The centre also incorporates an early years education area with enclosed outside play space and separate kitchen, a consultation room, clinic room and a reception. A larger community kitchen is accessible on the ground floor.

The Edge *(make this a link to the main Edge page)*

The Edge SureStart Children's and Community Centre
Dalby Road
Melton Mowbray
Leicestershire
LE13 0BQ

The Edge consists of a main hall for group activities for up to 40 people seated, a consultation room, a reception area, a community kitchen and an early years education area with enclosed outside play space and garden. The centre has on site parking including two disabled parking bays.

Fairmead *(make this a link to the Fairmead page)*

Fairmead SureStart Children's and Community Centre
64 Drummond Walk
Melton Mowbray
Leicestershire
LE13 1JF

The Fairmead centre consists of a reception, community hall for up to 20 people seate
A kitchen on the ground floor, and a children's activity room and consultation room
on the first floor.

Room Hire
Room hire charges
Application form and Terms and Conditions of hire

If you are interested in hiring a room at one of the Children's and Community centres please contact the children's centre receptionist on 01664 502429 or ccreception@melton.gov.uk .

Community and Activity groups at the centres
Children's Centre Activities

Suggested simplified structure for the web pages

www.melton.gov.uk

www.melton.gov.uk/community_centre_hire

The Cove   The Edge   Fairmead
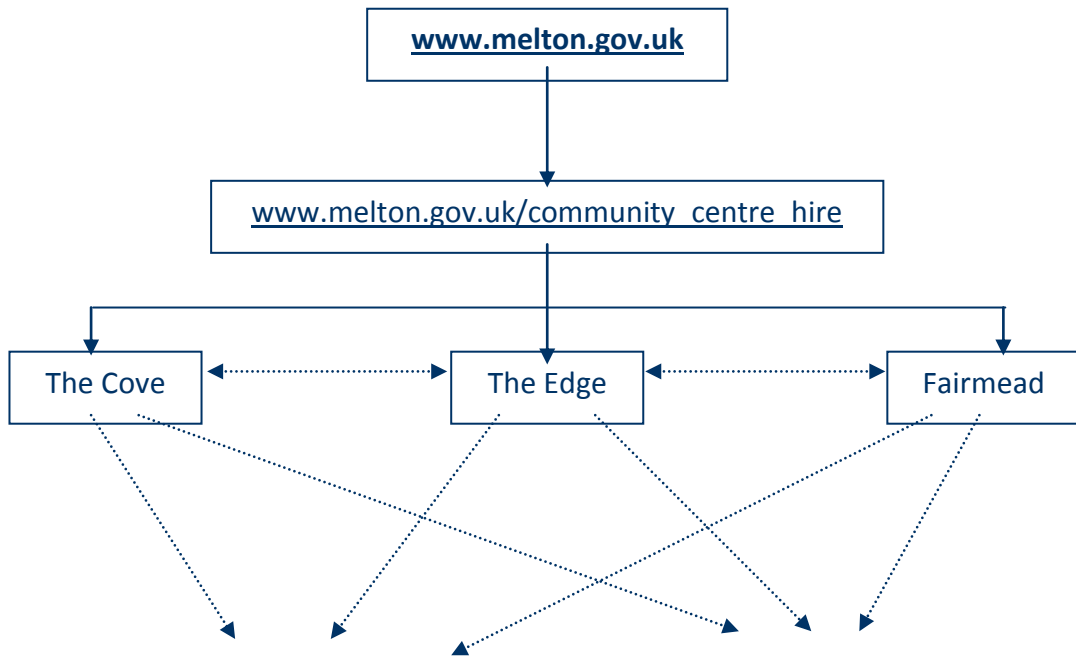
All three facility pages having links to the following pages and of course any additional pages as and when appropriate i.e. summer activities:

Room Hire Charges

Booking form and Terms and Conditions

Community and Activity Groups

Children's Centre Activities