

Written evidence submitted by Community Matters

1. Introduction

Community Matters is a UK based membership organisation supporting other not for profit organisations nationally as well as providing community development in West Yorkshire. Community Matters currently has about 12,000 members, of which nearly 5,500 either work in or manage a community venue such as community centres, parish halls and village halls.

These community venues are usually small charities run by volunteer trustees. Twenty five percent have no staff at all, and many run with one or two part time paid staff, often providing only cleaning and caretaking services.

The majority of these venues would have a capacity of between 100 and 200 and so would be in scope of the proposed legislation.

1. Overview

Whilst everybody can agree that more education about anti -terrorist or other incidents endangering public safety is needed, the current proposals would seem like a sledge hammer to crack a nut.

Most community venues survive on the funds that they generate from the hiring of rooms or spaces. A quarter of our members have annual incomes of under £20,000, and more than two thirds have an income of under £100,000. Many community spaces weathered the COVID 19 pandemic thanks to external and government support. However at the end of that support very few recovered their usage level ,and even now many have still not recovered usage to pre-pandemic levels.

Most community venues are at the heart of their community and seek to ensure that the charges for the use of their space are affordable to their community. This means that they are unable to pass increased costs on to that community, as has been noted during the past year with the significant increase in utility costs.

2. General issues

Looking at the draft legislation we have comments about a number of specific aspects of this.

3.1. 5 Persons responsible for qualifying public premises or events

- 3.1.1. We can see a number of issues relating to this with our members. Our understanding both from the draft legislation and the evidence sessions is that an individual will need to be identified who will take responsibility for the organisation's compliance with the proposed legislation. As these centres frequently have no paid staff, (or part-time staff as cleaners or caretakers) this probably means that a Trustee would have to take on this responsibility. Given the current issues nationally with the recruitment of Trustees partially caused by the increase in responsibilities that the role now has accrued,

how will this help? Our concern is that this additional responsibility is a potential barrier to trustee recruitment. As many trustee boards for community venues often lack a full board, this could increase the number of trustee boards that fail to recruit enough trustees to function, with the potential for closure of a much needed community organisation. We have already seen a significant increase in closures due to lack of trustees in the last two years, and feel that this legislation will just accelerate the trend.

- 3.1.2. Often a community venue does not have on-site staff, with hirers being provided with a key or a way to access the building. In this instance, who would be responsible for compliance with the terrorism evaluation? Or would the hirer need a co-operation notice to make them responsible? If this was the case, many community groups are likely to consider this an onerous responsibility and potentially cease to hire the venue leading to a loss of income and a loss of financial viability for the community space.

3.2. 11 Standard terrorism evaluation

- 3.2.1 There is a requirement for the lower tier of venues to undertake a terrorism evaluation, and much was made in the evidence sessions that this would be easy to complete and would not require external support. The draft evaluation requires the organisation to carry out 6 tasks: -
- Task 1 - Plan to warn people on the premises that an attack is taking place
 - Task 2 – Plan to lockdown your premises
 - Task 3 – Plan to evacuate the premises
 - Task 4 - Plan to call the emergency services and relay the necessary information
 - Task 5 - Use available first aid and fire safety equipment
 - Task 6 - Consider how you can make your neighbours or local network aware of your plan and alert them of an attack
- 3.2.2 These all make the assumption that the venue has employees or volunteers on the premises at all times. For small community venues this is rarely the case. Given this, the completion of the evaluation which would be a legal requirement becomes a paper exercise and does not help to ensure the safety of the public. On the other hand if the requirement is delegated to hirers would they take notice of it? And how could compliance be enforced?
- 3.2.3 The evaluation states that “It is available for inspection if required by the Regulator.” This only proves that somebody has completed the document not that it is live, and in many cases situations will dictate that it is not a live document.

The evaluation document also recommends that

- The plan is appropriately rehearsed and tested so that it can be readily implemented in the event of an attack;
- You keep the plan 'alive' by incorporating it into existing refresher training and briefing cycles;

This is difficult to do if you don't have the venue staffed all of the time.

3.3 13 Duty to provide terrorism protection training

- 3.3.1 We fully understand and endorse the value of "appropriate" training. However, the draft legislation is not clear about who would be classed as a relevant worker. If the venue is not permanently staffed, would there be an expectation on hirers to receive that training? The minister was also unsure in his evidence to the committee on this subject.
- 3.3.2 The hard emphasis on terrorist activity is understandable in urban parts of the core cities, but has much less relevance in rural village areas in for example Cumbria or Devon where an incident is much more likely to be an individual potentially with mental health issues or long standing grievances and a knife or firearm. In these areas the emphasis on terrorist reconnaissance and bombs is a lot less helpful.
- 3.3.3 In the evidence sessions much has been made of the free training that is available. To be effective the training needs to be relevant to the individual's situation, or provided in a way that people can immediately translate what they see or are told to their own environment. Currently the training does not meet this in most of its modules. It uses examples drawn from a very large hospital, a large hotel and a tube station. These scenarios whilst instantly recognisable to somebody in the capital have very little relatable relevance to organisations in small towns or rural areas
- 3.3.4 Equally the draft legislation suggests that the training should be done on a regular basis. Constant repeating of the same e-learning we believe would not be helpful or beneficial.

4 Recommendations for additional or amended drafting to the draft Bill?

- 4.1 We recognise that the numbers used to delineate the tiers are arbitrary. Our views would be to continue with the enhanced tier as planned in the legislation, as that was identified in the report from the Manchester Arena bombing.
- 4.2 For the standard tier we have two suggestions. Either make compliance voluntary with a view to extending the duty in the future should that be needed, or increase the arbitrary number to remove more of the small voluntary managed community spaces from the scope of the duty.

5 Other comments

5.1 In the evidence session much was made of the data gathered from the consultation and the 2,755 responses that were received. However Ipsos MORI in their report state that 4,255 responses were omitted from the analysis as participants did not complete and formally submit their response form, meaning they did not provide consent to participating. No information was provided during the consultation to say that it was necessary to reach the last page and formally consent to participation.

5.2 Shaun Hargreaves in his evidence suggested that all sectors had been consulted about the legislation. As one of the largest membership organisations working with not for profits in the arena of community buildings, we have not been consulted at any point in the creation of the legislation.

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