

FUNCTION FIXERS
PRACTICAL CONFERENCE PLANNING GUIDE

How to Find a Conference Venue for 500 Delegates

A step-by-step guide to capacity, layout, logistics, budget and venue selection

THE SHORT ANSWER

Start with the event format, not the headline capacity. A venue that can seat 500 theatre-style may still be unsuitable if you also need catering space, an exhibition, a stage, production control and breakout rooms.

This guide is designed for PAs, EAs, event managers and anyone responsible for sourcing a large conference venue in London or elsewhere in the UK.

FREE, INDEPENDENT VENUE FINDING

Tell us what you need and we will create a handpicked shortlist, check availability and help negotiate the best available terms - at no cost to you.

Finding the right venue starts with the right brief

A conference for 500 delegates is large enough for venue choice, circulation and production to become closely connected. The main room matters, but so do registration, refreshment breaks, toilets, cloakrooms, accessibility, loading access and the time required to move everyone between sessions.

The best venue is not necessarily the one advertising the highest capacity. It is the one that can deliver your complete event comfortably, safely and within budget.

Your planning snapshot

Decision	What to confirm	Why it matters
Main session	500 usable seats in the required layout	Published capacity may exclude a stage, production desk or camera positions.
Arrival	Registration points and queue space	Five hundred arrivals can create congestion very quickly.
Breakouts	Number, size and session pattern	Rooms must be available at the same time and close enough for fast changeovers.
Catering	Where 500 people will eat and take breaks	A separate catering area protects session time and improves flow.
Production	AV, power, rigging, loading and crew access	Technical restrictions can affect both the format and the final cost.
Access	Step-free routes and inclusive facilities	Accessibility must cover the whole delegate journey, not only the auditorium.

1. Define the event before searching

Before looking at individual venues, write down what the conference needs to achieve. A clear brief prevents attractive but unsuitable spaces from reaching the shortlist.

Delegate profile. Who is attending, where are they travelling from and are there particular accessibility, security or cultural requirements?

Programme format. Is the day built around one plenary session, parallel content streams, workshops, an exhibition or networking?

Event timings. Include supplier access, registration, rehearsals, live sessions, catering and breakdown - not simply guest arrival and departure.

Priorities. Decide what is essential, what is desirable and where you can compromise. Location, exclusivity, sustainability, production freedom and cost rarely carry equal weight.

2. Calculate the space you actually need

Ask venues to confirm capacity for your chosen layout after allowing for every item that will occupy the room. For a 500-delegate conference this may include a stage, lectern, comfort monitors, technical desk, cameras, aisles, accessibility spaces and set or branding.

IMPORTANT

A room listed for 500 theatre-style can fall below your requirement as soon as staging or production equipment is added. Request a scaled floor plan showing the proposed layout.

Build a venue brief that gets useful proposals

The more precise the initial brief, the easier it is to compare venues on a like-for-like basis. Give venues enough information to provide realistic availability, layouts and costs.

3. Include these essentials in your brief

- Preferred date plus any flexibility and alternative dates
- Expected, minimum and maximum delegate numbers
- Main-room layout and all required staging or production positions
- Number and capacity of breakout rooms, including when each is needed
- Registration, cloakroom, speaker preparation and organiser office requirements
- Exhibition stands, sponsor areas, poster displays or product demonstrations
- Catering style, dietary requirements and whether lunch must be seated
- AV, streaming, recording, interpretation, Wi-Fi and power requirements
- Accessibility, security, sustainability and branding requirements
- Accommodation, parking, coach access or proximity to public transport
- Total budget and whether it must include VAT, catering, equipment and service charges

4. Choose a location delegates can reach

A lower room rate is not always better value if the location increases travel costs, causes late arrivals or makes an overnight stay necessary. Look at the likely origin of delegates and choose the most practical transport hub or region.

For a national audience, compare rail journey times rather than assuming London is automatically the easiest option. Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Bristol, Glasgow and other regional cities can work extremely well depending on the delegate map.

5. Decide whether you need one room or a venue ecosystem

For a straightforward plenary conference, an auditorium with generous foyer space may be enough. A multi-stream event may need a conference hotel, academic venue, purpose-built centre or large corporate campus with several nearby rooms.

Keep the delegate journey simple. If people have only ten minutes between sessions, distant breakouts, slow lifts or complicated routes will disrupt the programme. Ask the venue to walk through a complete changeover with you.

Typical venue types to consider

Venue type	Often works well when...
Conference centre	You need purpose-built production, strong delegate flow and multiple rooms.
Large hotel	Accommodation, catering and meeting space need to sit under one roof.
Academic venue	You need tiered lecture theatres, classrooms or good value outside term time.
Stadium or arena	Brand impact, exhibition space, parking or very large circulation areas matter.
Museum or heritage venue	The setting and guest experience are central, with production adapted to venue restrictions.
Blank-canvas venue	You want creative freedom and have the budget and time to bring in infrastructure.

Compare the whole cost, not just the hire fee

Venue quotations can be structured in very different ways. One venue may offer a day delegate rate; another may quote room hire, catering, furniture and technical equipment separately. Convert every proposal into the same cost framework before making a decision.

6. Ask what is included

- Room hire and exclusive-use areas
- Furniture, linen, staging and lecterns
- Standard AV package, microphones, screens and technician hours
- Wi-Fi specification and any dedicated bandwidth
- Tea, coffee, refreshments and lunch
- Staffing, security, cleaning and cloakroom provision
- Delivery, setup, rehearsal, overtime and breakdown access
- VAT, service charge and any minimum catering spend

Also allow for likely extras such as enhanced production, external suppliers, branding, power, rigging, recording, entertainment, transport, accommodation and contingency. A venue that looks more expensive initially may provide better value if it includes equipment and staffing that others charge separately.

7. Check availability properly

A venue is not genuinely available until the exact rooms, access periods and commercial terms required for your event are confirmed. Ask whether space is being held for another client, how long an option can be maintained and what action is needed to secure it.

If your date is flexible, request alternatives. Moving by a day, choosing a quieter month or avoiding peak midweek demand can widen the choice and sometimes improve the terms available.

8. Shortlist venues against the same criteria

Score each serious option consistently. A simple weighted comparison prevents one impressive feature from obscuring practical weaknesses.

Criterion	Priority	Evidence to request
Usable capacity and layout	Essential	Scaled floor plan
Breakout availability	As required	Room schedule
Delegate flow	High	Site visit or event plan
Transport and access	High	Journey and step-free routes
Production suitability	High	Technical specification
Total comparable cost	Essential	Itemised quotation
Contract flexibility	High	Terms, deadlines and cancellation scale

Use the site visit to test the event in real life

A site visit should be a working session, not just a tour. Take the draft agenda, floor plans and supplier questions with you. Walk the route that a delegate, speaker, organiser and production crew will each take.

9. Questions to ask during a site visit

- Where will queues form at registration, security and cloakrooms?
- Can 500 delegates take refreshments at the same time?
- How quickly can delegates reach breakout rooms and return to plenary?
- Are there enough toilets and are accessible facilities conveniently located?
- Where can speakers prepare, store materials and enter the stage?
- What are the loading route, lift dimensions, access times and noise restrictions?
- What power, rigging, internet and in-house production facilities are available?
- Which spaces are shared with other events and how is sound transfer managed?
- What signage and branding are permitted inside and outside the venue?
- What is the wet-weather or disruption plan for any external element?

10. Review accessibility and inclusion

Check step-free arrival from the street or car park, accessible registration heights, lifts, seating positions, toilets, hearing support and evacuation arrangements. Ask how delegates can request adjustments and whether assistance dogs, quiet spaces, prayer rooms, captioning or British Sign Language interpretation can be accommodated.

Avoid treating accessibility as a final compliance check. It should influence the venue shortlist, room layouts, communications and production plan from the beginning.

11. Examine the contract before committing

Confirm the final scope in writing and check payment dates, cancellation terms, minimum numbers, attrition, room release dates, supplier rules, insurance requirements, damage provisions and overtime charges. Make sure the contract reflects every space and access period promised during negotiations.

FINAL CHECK

Before signing, compare the contract, quotation and event plan side by side. Any assumption that matters to delivery should be written into the agreement or an attached schedule.

A sensible booking timeline

12 months or more before: begin searching if the date is fixed, the location is popular, several breakouts are needed or accommodation is required.

6-12 months before: often provides a reasonable choice for a standard 500-person conference, subject to city and season.

Less than 6 months before: can still work, especially with date or location flexibility, but decisions may need to be faster.

Common mistakes to avoid

Relying on the advertised maximum capacity. Ask for the capacity after stage, technical equipment, aisles and accessibility spaces are included.

Forgetting arrival and break-time congestion. Model the busiest ten minutes of the day, not just the sessions.

Holding too few breakout rooms. Confirm the programme pattern and concurrent room needs before releasing space.

Comparing headline prices. Build a complete cost comparison using the same assumptions for every venue.

Leaving production until later. Technical requirements can change capacity, access, staffing and cost.

Booking before checking the contract detail. Ensure agreed spaces, timings and inclusions appear in the paperwork.

Frequently asked questions

How much space is needed for a 500-person conference?

There is no single square-metre answer because the space required depends on layout, staging, production, catering and breakouts. Ask for a scaled plan based on the complete event, not a theoretical room maximum.

What venue type is best for 500 delegates?

Purpose-built conference centres, large hotels, universities, stadiums and major cultural venues can all work. The right choice depends on programme complexity, location, accommodation, production and budget.

How far in advance should the venue be booked?

Starting 9-12 months ahead is sensible for a fixed date or complex brief, and earlier may be advisable for peak dates or extensive accommodation. Shorter lead times are possible when dates and locations are flexible.

Should catering be in the main conference room?

Usually a separate area is preferable because it protects session time, supports networking and allows the main room to remain set. If the same room must be used, build realistic turnaround time into the agenda.

How many registration desks are required?

That depends on arrival pattern, ticketing technology, security checks and whether badges are prepared. Ask the venue or registration supplier to calculate throughput for the peak arrival window.

Can a venue finder help negotiate the rate?

Yes. An experienced venue finder can compare proposals, identify hidden extras, challenge unsuitable packages and negotiate commercial terms. Function Fixers provides this service free to clients because venues pay commission.

Let Function Fixers find the right venue

Finding a conference venue for 500 delegates involves much more than matching a date to a room capacity. Function Fixers can save you hours of searching by turning your brief into a tailored shortlist of suitable venues in London, across the UK or in Europe.

We can check availability, gather comparable proposals, highlight practical issues, arrange site visits and help negotiate the best available terms. Our service is free and independent: venues pay commission, while you receive experienced, impartial support.

SEND US YOUR BRIEF

Share your date, location, delegate numbers, room requirements and budget. We will help you identify venues that can deliver the complete event - not simply fit 500 chairs into a room.

Website	www.functionfixers.co.uk
Telephone	020 7186 8686
Service	Free, independent venue finding
Coverage	London, the UK and Europe

About Function Fixers

Function Fixers is an established venue finding agency with more than 35 years of experience helping organisations source venues for conferences, meetings, training, corporate events and private functions. The team combines detailed venue knowledge with personal, practical advice.

This guide is for general planning purposes. Capacities, availability, costs and venue policies should always be confirmed for the specific event.