

Hooe Parish Council

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Minutes of the Village Hall Project Committee Meeting of 17th August 2023

Attendees: Cllr A. Loyd (AL), Cllr S. Crawhurst (SC), Cllr G. Kirk (GK), Cllr D. Carey (DC), Cllr B. Leonard (BL)

In attendance: J. Warrener (Clerk/RFO)

13 members of the public present. Meeting opened at 7pm

Public Attendance

The meeting will be conducted in accordance with Standing Orders and any person attending the meeting must abide by these rules. The Parish Council may choose to exclude a person under section 1(8) of the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960 if a person fails to meet the standards and comply with the Chairman's requests.

Public Questions

Public participation on matters on the agenda are at the chairman's discretion. In accordance with Standing Orders 3(e-k), the session will last for no longer than 10 minutes with a person speaking for no longer than 2 minutes.

End of public participation.

Business To Be Transacted

The Clerk reported to the meeting that the order of the agenda is to be changed, and the public questions are to be brought forward to after agenda item 3, so a chairman is in place to manage the Council meeting.

1. **To receive nominations and select a Chairman for the Village Hall Project Committee**

AL (outgoing Chairman) asked for nominations for Chairman.

BL proposed himself as Chairman and GK seconded. DC challenged whether it is correct for a Councillor to put themselves forward for nomination. The Clerk advised she would need to check, so a second vote was taken based on the challenge made.

GK proposed BL be Chairman and SC seconded. All agreed.

Resolved that BL be Chairman of the Village Hall Project Committee.

2. **To receive nominations and select a Vice Chairman for the Village Hall Project Committee**

SC nominated AL for Vice Chairman. GK seconded. All agreed.

Resolved that AL be Vice Chairman of the Village Hall Project Committee

3. **Disclosure of Interests**

Interests in accordance with the Localism Act 2011 and the Parish Council code of conduct.

To receive councillors' declarations of interest regarding matters on the agenda and consider any written requests or dispensation as a result. Any changes to the register of interests should be notified to the clerk.

SC made a statement to the meeting.

As the author of the Appraisal Report on Options for the Village Hall I wish to inform the Committee that I will not take part in the discussions and debate of the Report to avoid any suggestions of conflict of interest.

It is common knowledge that I live opposite the village hall and some members of the public have suggested that I therefore have a vested interest in certain outcomes. I have in the past expressed opposition to the selling of the existing site and development of a much larger new hall on the Recreation Ground.

By way of background, I was asked to put myself forward to join the Parish Council about 2 years ago. I am a chartered town planner by profession and was elected. I am the only councillor on the Council with this expertise and experience. As

further examination of the village hall issue was required, I volunteered to prepare a comprehensive appraisal of options using standard techniques and methods.

Before completing the report, I insisted that the Council have discussions with Wealden District Planners to ascertain the planning and highway parameters of the any options. This was vital because no record exists of any previous meeting between Hooe Parish Council and Wealden Planners.

Our meeting with the Planners was minuted and attended by another Councillor and the Clerk. The outcome of the meeting is reflected in the appraisal report.

It should be stressed that the Parish Council have received very few comments on the report, some in favour, some against and none of the comments have questioned the appraisal methods used or the basis data upon which the findings are based.

Moreover, many of the key questions, such as - can we demonstrate demand for a larger hall to funding authorities? how do you finance and build a new hall while still keeping the existing one functioning are not answered by any of the critics of my report.

I am happy to answer any questions about the report but as stated earlier, I will not take part in any discussions or debate so as not to influence the decision of the Parish Council.

BL asked SC whether he is referring to just agenda item 7, SC responded yes.

Meeting Closed to Receive Public Questions.

BL announced he wished to make a statement before inviting questions from the public.

As the new Chairman, I remind everyone here, this meeting is audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of the minutes. I'm sorry to report but it's likely this meeting will be a long one – hope you have a comfortable cushion. We are likely to need a comfort break.

A Council is only effective if it has the electorates trust. Our goals must be integrity, transparency and to provide the opportunity for scrutiny. I've been on the Council for 3 months now and am convinced that it is at the heart of the Council now, but some more work is needed to convince those that don't share that view and as Chairman I will strive to do that. I came in with no history, no allegiance to anyone, yes a bit naive of the realities of local government (it's certainly not the vicar of Dibley). Everyone is working flat out, a tremendous amount has been achieved just in the last year or so but there's still a lot to do to achieve that goal.

I'm going to allow two slots for public questions or comments both before and after the Committee's debate and before Councillor's vote on Agenda item 7, following feedback – if people feel they don't have a voice then we have failed before we start. This is subject to acceptable conduct when the public are not permitted to take part in any way so please be prepared to take notes during the debate for later comment. I stress, this is subject to acceptable conduct.

After the Annual Parish Meeting the Council did receive complaints about how some members of the public conducted themselves making others feel unable to share views in a respectful environment. This Council does not tolerate bullying, discrimination or intimidation to silence others and influence council decisions having already signed up to the National Civility and Respect Policy, which I will enforce if necessary.

I am aware, having seen and heard myself, some residents accuse the Clerk to the Parish of leading or running the council. Anyone who understands the law correctly will know that this is impossible and the suggestion of it, in my view, is simply to discredit the council because they don't have anything genuine to fight their arguments. It's worse than that: In my view, just from this week alone, a deliberate and wilful campaign is being waged by a small number of individuals against the Clerk and some of their behaviour might be considered the textbook definition of bullying. Everything I've witnessed shows their accusation to be just fantasy and I intend to ask the full council to consider appropriate steps to stop the relentless abuse. The Clerk is highly qualified and professional with over 20 years experience, she deserves better – this Council is lucky to have found her when they did otherwise events might have turned out very bad for everyone – about time she received some emails of support. Any Parish Council or Committee operates as "one" – all Councillors are responsible for a decision – not the Chairman, not the Clerk whom has no vote, nor any individual Councillor. Please direct your comments to the Chairman.

A resident said that she would like to thank the Clerk as without her nothing would have been done.

A resident asked the Chairman as you have just been voted on as Chairman of this Committee tonight, you appear to be well prepared, is this normal?.

BL replied that I prepared for this meeting as I intended to put myself forward to the Council for the position of Chairman.

The resident asked what about the rest of the Committee?

BL said that if they wanted to be Chairman, they could have also prepared a statement just as I did.

A resident stated that under the disclosure of interests you have said at various times you would rather listen to the birds than music, so this suggests you are not in favour of having a village hall on the recreation grounds, is that not a conflict of interest?

BL indicated it is not a conflict of interest in my opinion, we all live within very close proximity to this venue or any other proposed venue. BL asked what do you define as too close?

The resident responded that you defined too close because you said that you will be able to hear the music and I don't mind whether it stays here or goes there.

A resident said that you have categorically stated you don't want to hear wedding music?.

BL said that I expressed my views at a public meeting, I'm entitled to a view just the same as a resident and as the Chairman I don't have the ability to tell anyone here what to vote for, and this Committee cannot make a decision with one person.

A resident stated that Cllr. Crawhurst has said that as he lives opposite the village hall, he has disclosed that as an interest and he has declined to be Chairman or take part, is that not the same for you?.

BL said that he hasn't declined to be Chairman, in my view he has listen to a criticism that has made against him and he has taken the transparent position to not take part in debating this report.

The resident also reported that he was the author of the report.

BL replied yes.

A resident said that it was their interpretation that it is alright to have an opinion because you live in the village, to me rather than the Parish Council, it is to listen to the resident's views and take a combined view, so there are people on the Parish Council that I don't know what their opinions are about the village hall because I haven't discussed it with them. So I think the issue for me is ensuring that the Parish Council follows proper process and ensures it consults residents on various options available and that is being done tonight.

BL said that he would like you to reserve judgement to the end of the meeting when you have the opportunity to make further comments as to whether you feel your objectives have been met.

Meeting Re-opened

4. To receive apologies and reasons for absence in accordance with the Local Government Act 1972 S85 (3)

RC and PY gives their apologies.

BL said that the Clerk made every effort to ask Councillors their availability and at the time the meeting was set, everyone indicated they were able to attend, unfortunately due to circumstances beyond their control, they are not on holiday, just unable to attend.

5. **Minutes of the Previous Meetings to be agreed and signed as a true record.**

To approve and sign the minutes of the Village Hall Project Committee meeting held on 26th October 2022 as a true record.

BL noted the date should read 26th October 2022 not 2023.

Proposed by AL and seconded by GK. All agreed.

Resolved that the minutes of the 26th October 2022 are accepted as a true record.

Matters For Consideration and Resolution

6. **To discuss and agree the Terms of Reference for the Village Hall Project Committee**

AL requested changes to 5.4 by the removal of the words from the first sentence starting from 'undertake' until end of sentence and to omit all the remaining text from the second line starting 'The Village Hall Project Committee shall'.

AL requested the first two sentences be removed from 5.6 and for 5.7 remove the words 'shall ask' and change to 'may request'. AL asked to amend 6.1 line two by omitting '3' and change it to '2' and adding the words '3g' after 'standing orders'.

Proposed by AL and seconded by SC. All agreed.

Resolved that the amendments be accepted to the Terms of Reference for the Village Hall Project Committee.

7. **To consider the Appraisal of Options for Village Hall Report (April 2023) and agree any action as necessary.**

BL stated he wished to make a statement to his fellow Councillors.

Councillors, the village hall question has divided the village a long time now, over 10 years since an idea was first floated. Various councils at their time did what they could to engage the public with plans, meetings, models and talk to varying degrees. The fact is, in all that time they could not make a case, otherwise it would be done & dusted now. Pre-2020 (so before Covid, Ukraine, Energy prices, cost of living crisis) no council was successful in getting any project to fruition even with interest rates close to zero. Any business case pre-2020 is no good now in 2023 anyway and we must look forwards, with what we are able to do now only.

The past is arguably irrelevant. So, any feeling you have that this council is reneging on a previously agreed decision, I ask you to put aside – no past council made their case to the taxpayers for final approval, therefore this council has stopped nothing – our Clerk has stopped nothing – there was nothing to stop. We shouldn't plan anymore, spend anymore, come up with ideas anymore – not without a renewed mandate for a 2023 world.

As you know councillors, the precept – this is the amount of money from a council tax bill that comes to our parish already the 2nd highest for smaller England parishes, currently around £150pa band D. – is mostly governed by our spending commitments. At the Annual Parish Meeting, some people were surprised that everything we spend is divided between approx. 209 households – for every £1000 we spend as a council, roughly £5 is charged to each taxpayer. I urge councillors to reflect more on this approach when considering spending – so the impact of any proposed project is more clearly understood in those terms. In the next few months, we'll discuss setting it for the next year. I suspect we may struggle to keep it at the current level because most councils our size do not have village halls -and- allotments – and- land -and- tenants -and- a recreation grounds -and- a sports pavilion - to run and maintain. We have the same legal obligations and are governed by the same Act of Parliament as Wealden, East Sussex and the bigger authorities to maintain all those assets and other statutory requirements – you are to be congratulated as a team (council and clerk) for your work on this. It might be advisable for this work to be concluded before we know the true cost base of running the parish and so taxpayers know their on-going liability before being asked to consider increases.

So, in the interests of bringing this matter to a conclusion and ending the blight that has beset the village for years, I ask everyone on this committee, each of you to be honest and tell us where you're at before we go any further. You're entitled to an opinion and our taxpayers are entitled to know where you stand. A reputable council would be prepared to have that integrity and encourage more to speak out.

Does anyone wish to make a personal statement before we consider the Appraisal Report?

AL said that we all have our personal opinions, and we are still all opened to be swayed one way or another by the documents we receive, what we read, comments from the floor and emails etc., so at this point to actually say what we feel individually would not inform the process.

BL said that you do know you are entitled to an opinion, and it may be different to your fellow Councillors. BL said that I did hear one resident comment that she would like to know what Councillors think and I personally agree with that comment.

BL said that the Committee must take into account what the Clerk is saying to the Committee, and we can decide whether the Committee wish to accept the Clerk's recommendation or not. BL read out the contents of the Clerk's Briefing Note to the Committee as follows:

The Parish Council agreed on the 26th October 2022 that a report would be undertaken to review the options for the provision of a village hall and that Wealden District Planning Authority would be consulted to provide a view of the schemes proposed.

Cllr. Crawhurst having the appropriate skill set and understanding of the proposals undertook the role to prepare the report to present to the Parish Council and the residents of Hooe. The report was circulated to the residents on the emailing list and placed on the Parish Council's website on 2nd May 2023 and was reported in the June edition of the Parish News.

Cllr Crawhurst gave a presentation at the Annual Parish Meeting on the 26th May 2023 whereby the meeting was well attended, and the public were able to express their views. Criticisms were raised at Cllr. Crawhurst that he had shown bias in the preparation of this report and had directed the conclusions based on his own views. Residents also questioned the legality of whether Cllr Crawhurst should have written this report.

I consider the report to be a well-balanced report and has been drawn up in accordance with the instructions issued by the Parish Council. Cllr Crawhurst is legally entitled to write a report and put it before the Parish Council for consideration.

However, I would recommend that Cllr. Crawhurst does not participate in the Village Hall Project Committee meeting to debate the report or be part of the decision-making process to ensure transparency and not to be perceived by some as asserting any undue influence on the decision-making process. Cllr. Crawhurst may answer questions at the public section of the meeting as this does not form part of the legal meeting.

In the fourteen weeks since the report was issued only four residents have submitted written responses to the Clerk. Two responses stated the existing village hall should be closed and two stated nothing should be done further. Further points were raised at the Annual Parish Meeting as shown in the minutes, but no general consensus was reached.

Each Council Member has a fiduciary duty to consider the financial implications when making any decision on behalf of the Parish Council and its Council taxpayers.

The Financial Responsible Officer (RFO) has a statutory duty under section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 to manage, advise and report on the financial affairs on behalf of the Parish Council in accordance with all relevant laws and regulations.

Should Hooe Parish Council decide to implement one of the schemes identified in this report, and consider that funding is required in the form of a loan, the process to make an application is required as follows:

- All loan applications must be approved by Central Government following an assessment of the loan application by the East Sussex Association of Local Councils.
- A resolution must be made at a Full Council Meeting to seek the Secretary of State's approval to borrow a specified sum of money for a chosen scheme.
- A copy of the Parish Council's budget or cash flow forecast must be provided for the current year (and following year if available), showing the provision made to meet the loan costs, as well as a copy of the latest Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR).
- A business case must be submitted that outlines the proposed works, estimated costs, financial planning to fund the loan repayments and for the Parish Council to explain what steps it has taken to mitigate the risk for not being able to afford the loan repayments.
- For the Parish Council to provide information on how the Parish Council will afford the loan repayments, to provide a breakdown of funding resources, amounts to be used from reserves, and any increase of the precept to fund the borrowing.
- If the precept is to be increased to cover the loan repayment, to confirm the amount and percentage of the planned increase related to the loan only, and how much the increase will be for house holders at Band D.
- If applicable, provide evidence of public support to increase the precept to cover the loan repayment e.g. the results of any consultation.
- The Parish Council will be required to provide details how local residents were consulted on the project and associated borrowing even if you are not increasing the precept to fund the loan e.g., correspondence, newsletter, website or in the agenda of public meetings.

I have prepared a chart that summarises the loan costs dependant on the amount borrowed, the repayments that would be made and the impact on the precept for the Band D Council taxpayer of Hooe should the Parish Council decide to take out a Public Works Loan with Central Government.

Due to the complexity of the proposals set out in the report, that the integrity of the report is under question, and with the implications of the long-term financial commitment to the taxpayers of Hooe, I recommend that the Parish Council seeks the opinion of the internal auditor (Mulberry & Co.) to evaluate the findings and conclusions set out in this report.

The purpose of the evaluation would be to verify the Parish Council has produced a balanced and factually correct report, whether it has a sound business case to move forward, and whether it is financially sustainable to request a loan from Central Government should this course of action be agreed by the Parish Council.

I would suggest the scope of the brief would include:

- To provide an overview of the findings and conclusions of the report and to make any recommendations to the Parish Council to assist the Parish Council to consider the conclusions of the report.
- Whether the Parish Council has a business case to build a new village hall or undertake the refurbishment of the existing village hall?.
- Whether the Parish Council would meet the criteria to be accepted for a Public Works Loan?.
- To advise on the affordability and financial impact to the Parish Council's finances and to the residents of Hooe.
- To consider the implications for the Parish Council should a bridging loan be required.
- To identify the risks associated with such a financial commitment and the legal restraints that the Parish Council must consider.
- To advise whether the community should be consulted and recommend how this should be done.

A report undertaken by the internal auditors Mulberry & Co. would be charged at an hourly rate of £65 + VAT. I consider that such a report would give the Parish Council the confirmation that any future decision made will be based on facts approved by a professional body and in the best interests of the residents of Hooe.

BL added that attached to the report is a table of figures that illustrates the effect on Council taxpayers by borrowing certain sums of money and for ease of reading the Clerk has calculated it by £100k chunks, apart from the first one which is a £50k loan.

BL explained that the first column of the table is the loan amount the Parish Council might ask for, the length of the loan is put here at fifty years because that is the smallest repayment and if you have a loan over ten years you are paying back the capital. BL said that the reason the costs are over fifty years is that if the term was any less the effect on the precept would be higher, so this is the lowest cost, the third column shows the interest rate at the time this table was produced which was 5.57%.

BL said that the next column shows the precept charge, this being the total amount of income received through the current precept which is £30,999. BL advised the other income the Parish Council receives is rents and hiring out things, and is not a significant amount.

BL indicated that the £149 is the current band D payment for a property for the current tax year, the next column would be the total cost of the loan repayment followed by what the precept would have to be to cover that loan repayment. BL said that if you recall one of the bullet points from the loan requirements stated you must show the taxpayers the effect on the precept of the loan only and this is that column, so a revised band D annual payment for Council taxpayers would be £163 up from £149 which is a 10% increase on the current level. BL explained the cost of borrowing on £50,000 would be £148,791 over fifty years and therefore the amount that taxpayers are paying simply for the loan is £14 per year which is 9% of their Council tax bill.

BL said that you can see what the figures are for any multiple of £100k, so if you want to know the cost for £350k, you would just add the £300k and £50k figures together which will give you a guide. BL pointed out that these figures are to the nearest pound or percentage and the loan figures have been obtained from the Public Loans Works Board being a statutory board of the government.

BL stated that it is based on the current year's precept, but there is no guarantee that this rate will be the ongoing annual precept and the precept for the following year will be subject to the usual budgetary changes. BL confirmed that the revised precept does not include any running costs for any new building as these are not known at this time, no other future project costs are included, so if the Parish Council decided to undertake another capital project in the future, additional costs would be added if we were allowed to borrow further.

BL said that if the Parish Council were to take out a £500k loan to fund the planning, construction, to open the new hall, to sell the existing village hall and the land, this could well take up to a seven year timescale. BL suggested the Parish Council might repay £300k from the proceeds from selling of this village hall and the adjoining land, so the taxpayers would have a remaining £200k loan for the rest of the 43 years timescale. BL explained the precept from years 1 to 7 would be an increase from £149 to £291 a year, this being a 96% increase doubling almost of the precept and an extra £143 per year thereafter.

BL said that lets assume that all goes to plan, the loan is then reduced and in the remaining years, 8 to 50 the precept is still at £206 representing a 38% increase which is an extra £57 per year for the rest of the loan and for a typical band D taxpayer the cost they would occur over the first seven years would be £998, and over the total fifty year timescale the cost to each and every taxpayer would be £3,451.

BL said that he did not think such figures like this have ever been produced by a previous Council to explain the cost of a project.

Closed Meeting to take a Public Question

A resident asked whether interest rates go up during the period of the loan.

BL explained that all loans with the Public Works Board are fixed at the time you sign up for the loan. The Clerk explained the loan rates change on a daily basis. BL advised that once a loan is signed the interest rate will be fixed for fifty years.

Meeting Re-opened

BL said that I know there is a desire within the council to keep or lower the precept –I respectfully remind councillors our current precept figure may not be a true reflection of the costs of this council, a lot of free time is currently given by staff and contractors subsidise works which is why I'm asking at the next appropriate meeting, everything should for transparency reasons be fully costed from next year. BL urged councillors to support setting the next precept reflective of our "true costs" and increase it, if necessary, before embarking on further costing exercises for any new projects.

BL said that bullet points 5-8 in the requirements for a public works loan are rightly onerous on a council to prove full agreement of the taxpayers for precept increases– I am confident none of these points have ever been actioned before.

BL indicated the Village Hall Appraisal Report has been available for over three months now and asked if any Councillor would like to comment on the content of the report.

GK noted that it doesn't mention any lighting, you may need lighting if you have a village hall on the recreation grounds and people would need to walk along the road in the dark, lighting and pathway lighting would add more cost to the project.

AL said that any street lighting is very expensive.

BL reported that light can also be a problem for residents and would have to go out to consultation if this is considered. BL informed the meeting that he is to read out several of the responses received regarding the Village Hall Appraisal Report which is in addition to those comments already made at the Annual Parish Meeting and the minutes are available on the Parish Council's website. BL stated the purpose of the exercise is to give the people in the village a voice. BL explained in total eighteen responses had been received from residents which were as follows:

No. of Responses	Reasons / Comments
3	Either close or sell off the existing village hall
2	Do nothing – stay as we are
8	Refurbish existing village hall with caveats + one person opposed the instruction of an auditor to review the village hall appraisal report
2	Neither for or against
3	Considered the village hall appraisal report to be bias

BL explained that the comments made earlier that the Parish Council should listen to people's views, everyone is entitled to hear the points of views and I will read out some of the points of views.

Response A

Comments on the Options presented in Appraisal Study:

Option 1a – I assume this is the Baker Architects proposal exhibited in 2018. This proposal included football changing rooms (an approximate area of 52.5 sq m gross) as well as a meeting room and office space as part of the support accommodation for the activity hall. For the seating capacity of the activity hall see below. The total building area was 420 sqm gross (compare with your Appraisal figure of 392 sqm). This proposal had a Budget Estimate, dated March 2018, totalling £826,500.00. The village hall part (including support accommodation) was costed at £712,500 and the football changing rooms costed at £114,000. This Budget Estimate did not include any costs for external works e.g., car parking, landscaping etc, or utilities connections, or vehicular crossovers, or any professional fees. These additional items would easily cost over £200,000 taking the total budget to over £1 million at 2018 prices. I was advised by a councillor in July 2021, that the possible £1million cost was the reason the proposal was rejected, and the HPC efforts then focused on a proposal for the existing Village Hall site. There appears to be no formal records of resident's responses to the exhibited proposals, so it is impossible to draw any conclusions as to what the residents liked, disliked, or wanted from the proposal.

A. Option 1b – it is assumed the "budget scheme" selected for the Recreation Ground is the village hall design exhibited in June 2021 (originally intended for the existing Village Hall site). This proposal had a gross area of 280 sqm gross (compared with your Report figure of approximately 250 sqm gross). The size of the activity hall in this proposal is 132 sqm net; for the seating capability of the activity hall see below. The proposal was subsequently dropped by the HPC on the grounds that it was not viable due to inadequate parking provision required for a new development. There is a record of resident's comments to the proposal exhibited in June 2021 and it shows that there were only 31 responses (population of Hooe 2021 Census = 436); of these 31 responses only 6 were in favour of what was exhibited i.e., no caveats regarding size, appropriate site or car parking. There is a very small group of residents, who interpret the above 31 responses as a resounding statement from the whole village community supporting the exhibited proposal. This interpretation is still voiced today by the same group with a disregard to any factual data.

B. Option 2 – the existing Village Hall has a net floor area of 63.5 sqm for the activity hall. At a ratio of 1.1 sqm/seated persons at tables (see below), the activity hall can seat 57 persons. This was demonstrated by the 52 seated persons, with the limited number of available tables, for the Ukraine charity event held April 2022.

C. Seating Capacity of Activity Hall. A normal ratio used of floor area for seated persons at tables is 0.9 sqm/person. This is a ratio used for restaurants and cafes and is a 'cram them in' ratio. This may be okay for smaller areas but for larger areas, say more than 50 people to be seated, it is better for operational, safety and public liability reasons to adopt a higher ratio which will accommodate better circulation space around the tables as well as clear escape 'corridors' for emergency egress. Therefore, a safer ratio in my opinion, is 1.1 sqm per seated person. Using this ratio in **Option 2** above gives a seating at tables capacity of 57 persons, (compare with your Appraisal figure of 43).

Option 1a with an activity hall of 180 sqm net area, at a ratio of 1.1 sqm/person, would be able to seat 163 persons at tables (compare your Appraisal figure of 93)

Option 1b with an activity hall of 132 sqm net, at a ratio of 1.1 sqm/person, would be able to seat 120 persons (compare your Appraisal figure of 60).

D. Costs/Estimates. I do not agree with the costs/estimates associated with each Option because of the unit cost rate used (net and not gross areas), some inconsistency within the Appraisal of using gross versus net areas and some lack of clarity of Village Hall building versus activity hall. In addition, the extent of support accommodation (meeting room, office, storage, kitchen etc) has not been appraised and included in any assessment e.g., ratio of support accommodation to activity hall. Is a meeting room and or office required, is storage space adequate, is the kitchen adequate, is plantroom space adequate, is toilet provision adequate? The prime Appraisal factor seems to be only seating capacity and costs. Of all the above Options, the existing Village Hall has the least support accommodation. In any event, though I may arrive at different costs for Options 1a and 1b, the total cost figure will still be in the order of say £1m or £0.8m. This is way too high for a new facility which will not be used or needed by most residents (based on current and recent past usage). There is also no wherewithal by which the HPC or residents could raise such monies. Money available from grants (to charities only), has in the past been, greatly overestimated. At the last count £200,000 would be the likely maximum possible from grants, and that would be for a very poor parish with no assets and a heart melting reason for needing a new village hall. Note that the costs listed in the Appraisal are not the total costs of the project. Cost items such as landscaping, car parking, utilities, professional fees and a contingency sum have not been allowed for, and these could easily be 20 to 30% in addition to the build costs estimates. The agenda for a new village hall has been promoted by a very, very small minority of residents with visions of community minded residents happily skipping to a sparkling new facility, funded by a wealthy generous resident, to get a daily dose of community activity. Alas, the reality is that it is very difficult to get volunteers to arrange events other than a coffee morning or a bi-annual Open Gardens event. The thing that most residents would vote for is a reduction in the Precept and a reduction in HPC expenditure.

My vote is for keeping the existing Village Hall in working order. Costs for new car parking on adjoining land to be obtained and approved by residents.

Response B

If you wanted to write a clear, concise, unbiased appraisal as to whether our village would like or even benefit from the development of a new Village Hall or possibly re-develop an existing building to make it more usable and attractive to future users, who would you ask? An unbiased independent advisor or a Councillor who has openly declared that he does not want any development occupying the land that has been generously gifted to the Parish to use for the benefit of the parishioners. Why would you ask Councillor Crawhurst, one has to ask!

Remove all the unnecessary bulk/rubbish from the appraisal and you see a report designed to channel the readers thoughts to the one conclusion that Councillor Crawhurst wants you to see, Option 2.

Suggesting the building of a new Village Hall on the recreation ground would in some way urbanise the area is ridiculous. Many Village Halls are built on recreation grounds.

Suggesting that the previous owners of the parcel of land gifted it to the Council specifically to be used as a carpark is incorrect. I don't recall Mr Crawhurst being party to the legal transfer. It was gifted to be used by the Council in a way that benefitted the Village. Councillor Crawhurst knows that but carefully leads the readers thoughts towards a carpark. It has on several occasions been pointed out to the PC by those that were directly involved in the legal transfer process that a carpark was never mentioned, yet he continues to mislead.

He also continues to suggest that the gifted land is an allotment. It has always been a private garden.

The existing hall has serious structural issues but there is no great mention of that, no structural survey has been commissioned and little financial allowance made in his budget.

What evidence is there that spending £90K+ would attract new users when better and cheaper facilities are available in Ninfield. We still end up with a decaying energy sapping building coated with a new paint finish.

It matters not if Councillor Crawhurst's report is correct or not most people won't read it. They may glance the summary which neatly favours option 2. If Hooe parish Council adopt this report, then they are as guilty as the author for this extremely biased appraisal.

Councillor Crawhurst needs to declare his personal interest and stand down from this debate and the Council need to employ the services of an independent advisor if they want to retain some credit.

We would like to point out that we are neither in favour nor against the Village Hall staying where it is, we just want an unbiased report to be put to the village and a hall fit for purpose.

BL said that '**Response B**' is a factually incorrect statement that I can present evidence for, I have a letter here from Shepherds Consulting & Civil Engineers and a previous Council asked the company to complete an inspection and report on the structural integrity of this building on the 17/09/2019, something this person doesn't clearly know about. BL stated the report produced is extensive, but I refer to a single line that says 'subject to the following (the author is talking about what the Parish Council might do), we consider the overall structural integrity and adequacy of the building to be good'.

Response C

1. Appraisal options paper 27 April 23

1.1 Assessing demand

Thank you for the work undertaken in the appraisal. I know others will comment on the costs and options but my overarching conclusion, having also been involved in a previous Parish Council initiated working group looking at fundraising for a new village hall, is that demand has not been established by any systematic methods for any of the options that have been reviewed/proposed.

1.2 Counting the cost

Given the present cost of living crisis, the Parish Council cannot saddle the village with the development of a larger hall as it is much too high a cost for a small village. (Noting the basic figures identified of £1million for option 1a) and over £770,000 for option1b) and these costs don't include all the costs of development.) Indeed I would hope that the Parish Council would aim to reduce, not increase, the precept.

1.3 My preferred option

I would therefore prefer to keep the existing Village Hall continuing the refurbishment (especially the windows.)

I would also like there to be an assesment of the cost and potential funds available to provide an adjacent car park. This should be reviewed by the Parish Council in consultation with residents once the feasibility and costs are established.

1.4 A 'White Elephant?'

I am also concerned that the current hall is underused. The Hooe Village Community Group and the History Group preferring the church as their venue and the Hooe and Ninfield Open Group using facilities in Ninfield. As a result the Parish Council should undertake a concerted effort to promote the use of the existing village hall. If not, it will remain an incredibly expensive 'white elephant' and the alternative is to shut it down – which would be a real shame.

2.Supporting information for the meeting on 17 August 23. A briefing for council members

I strongly oppose using Parish Council funds on employing auditors, Mulberry and Co, to, in effect, audit the appraisal report with costs identified at £65 per hour plus VAT.

In my view, it is for the Parish Council to seek the views of villagers and make a decision on the best solution for Hooe with regard to the Village Hall. An audit is not needed at this stage and would be such a waste of money as no clear decision has yet been made nor any future action agreed. Surely the annual audit would review all processes to do with the Village Hall and a separate audit at this stage seems both over the top and totally wasteful.

BL asked the Clerk whether an annual audit review all processes to do with the village hall?.

The Clerk responded no.

Response D

My personal recommendation is the existing hall is sold off and the money banked in readiness to bring Parish farm up to standard at the relevant time. Councill meetings can be held remotely or in another hall.

Response E

We do not accept that Hooe is such a small community that there is no need for a hall. A public building, in the Village , should be available to meet the needs of villagers.

Option 2; refurbishment of the present village hall is a better choice than an expensive new build on the rec. even if planning permission was allowed. We don't think there would be enough demand for a large hall for weddings etc as there are several other halls within the local area already. A new larger hall would also be expensive to run and keep up.

What is needed in a newly refurbished Village Hall to make it a more useable facility.

Better car parking

Ideally a slightly larger hall . Could this be achieved by a small extension?

Storage for tables etc , Band music and equipment, possibly library books/jigsaws and sports equipment (Table Tennis Table?)

Modern Toilets

A proper kitchen with appropriate equipment not necessarily bigger than the current one. Not everyone is prepared to bring their own crockery and cutlery for an occasion!

It is worth noting that the use of hall has declined as a result of covid and the hall closure, leaving groups to find other alternatives or stop altogether. There is no reason to suppose that a newly refurbished hall wouldn't attract new people if it is well advertised and affordable. We will still need a Polling Station, meeting place for social events, council meetings etc.

Response F

From my point of view, I have serious misgivings about the Parish Council as it is presently operating under the leadership of the clerk. I have shared my thoughts with the Chair before now - that is to say whilst the Council continues in its failure to engage with the community it is here to represent, I cannot and will not support it in any way, shape or form and that includes making use of the village hall. This refusal to hold meaningful dialogue with parishioners appears to me to be a sign that Councillors and indeed the clerk are not prepared to listen to the views of parishioners on topics, which may include criticism.

I understand that this Parish Council is even minded to consider closing the village hall and selling off the land. Even considering this course of action is an affront to the people of this village and indeed to all those parish councillors who have gone before them and dedicated their time and effort to providing this and other facilities for almost 130 years. Those of you who would take this course of action I consider morally bankrupt and should resign their position without delay.

The village hall was built with a great deal of goodwill to serve as a meeting place for the people of the village and as such, those who have gone before have made it available to all without great hindrance and on reasonable terms. It is a vital asset to the village and councillors, instead of asking "what is its value", should be identifying how it can be utilised properly for the good of the village.

BL stated that **Response F** is factually incorrect, the Parish Council has no mind at the moment as to whether this hall is to closed or the land sold off as the Parish Council hasn't taken any decision yet.

BL explained the responses read out are specific to the Village Hall Appraisal Report, but the Parish Council has received two other related documents that have been given out this evening. BL added that the report is entitled 'the History of the Village Hall Project' and has been signed by the author. BL indicated that the longer coloured document is a response to

the History of the Village Hall Project. BL said that as those documents are not specifically related to the discussions about the Village Hall Appraisal Report I'm not going to read them out, but I will allow a short break before the public questions are open again should you wish to read the reports fully. BL advised that the author of the History of the Village Hall Project requested that we give the public time to read the report.

BL said that he wanted to clarify comments made about consultation, a community consultation would involve everyone on the electoral role receiving a voting pack and as of 1st June, this stood at 370 for Hooe. BL indicated in order to provide a mandate, the turnout must reach or exceed 111 responses (30% or greater) and this is required for any major project whether or not any borrowing is required. BL explained this information has been provided by Trevor Leggo, Chairman of the East Sussex Association of Local Councils.

BL confirmed the Parish Council has not been able to locate any detail relating to early "consultations" and despite repeatedly asking former councillors who had in depth knowledge for help. BL advised that it may not be common knowledge but pre-2021, Councillors used their own personal email systems so once someone is no longer a Councillors any evidence they might have for events, reports, consultations etc are not accessible. BL explained there was no Council website so only paperwork documents go back before that and after some searching we are unable to locate any previous detail on the form of the consultations, detail results of the analysis etc – therefore for transparency and scrutiny we may have to repeat that exercise in line with today's rigor and meet today's hurdles. BL suggested that information given out by Councillors "posted questionnaires and collected them themselves" and the results showed "over 80% support" cannot be substantiated by this Committee or scrutinised by the electorate to ensure they are happy the job was conducted fully and one questionnaire with one response to a property with 3 adults on the electoral role may not be in line with community consultation rules.

BL said that the Parish Council has seen a document that is the "feedback" of residents visiting plans and a model about redevelopment on this site from 26-28th June 2021 which indicated 34 individual responses (around 10% of the electorate) – we cannot authenticate the author and due to data protection we cannot publish parts the document but it's a list of qualitative comments only that are impossible to turn into quantitative results as simply for or against as many imply both.

DC suggested it is totally unnecessary to find out the results of that questionnaire as I am reliably told they don't exist anymore, it seems like the past Council is continually under question.

BL said that we are just pointing out that we don't have the information.

The Clerk confirmed that no paperwork is held and the advice from the East Sussex Association of Local Councils is that the process should start again. The Clerk pointed out on taking up the post she was excluded from the Village Hall Committee meetings even though it was a legal requirement for the Clerk to be in attendance.

DC asked to stop harking back at the previous Council and just get onward with the job.

BL stated I said that.

DC said that you are looking at the village hall and we know the past considerations didn't work.

BL said I believe I said that. BL said that he wanted to validate the advice that was given in a planning meeting that SC referred to in his report. The Clerk confirmed she administered the planning meeting and part of that meeting included the planning officer from Wealden District Council, Cllr Ann Loyd, Cllr Steve Crawhurst and the Clerk. The Clerk confirmed that the planning comments made in the Village Hall Appraisal Report were factually correct based on the advice given by the planning officer from Wealden District Council.

BL asked whether any other Councillor wished to make any further comments, otherwise that this is the end of the debate and we will have a five minute comfort break and to read the reports before taking further public questions.

Meeting Closed for a break at 8.31pm

Meeting Re-opened at 8.38pm.

BL said that I joined you just a week before the Annual Parish Meeting because I had read the appraisal report produced by Steve and I was incensed by the fact that this fiasco has been allowed to continue for more than 10 years, tax payers bills had been increased, saved up for grand plans with little proven justification or business case, certainly without my chance to vote.

BL said that when I joined you, anecdotal and other evidence you gave suggested we were to expect significant numbers of supporters of a new build project attending the annual meeting or lobbying councillors and I was surprised but intrigued. Well - that widespread anticipated groundswell of support did not materialise – I was dumbfounded at the lack of support I witnessed considering claims of comprehensive and outright past consultations. BL suggested the reports early

publication and clear conclusions that at this time that a new build is unattainable mainly on grounds of finance but also need - allowed ample opportunity for supporters of a new build to organise themselves and lobby councillors - they did not and only a handful in attendance offered an opinion for or against, only one resident gave remotely anything you could call a business case. BL reminded the meeting that he deliberately pushed & pushed the audience – to no significant avail – both for supporter or non. That's not the outcome you'd expect for supposedly a divisive, controversial issue – would you say?. BL said I had no input to the report content - I was pleased someone was finally brutally honest about the reality of such a massive project for one of England smallest parishes - Steve was honest.

BL raised his concern that we had not heard a lot from individual Councillors.

BL asked whether Councillors were in agreement with the appraisal report?.

DC said that he didn't agree with it all, but think it was fair.

AL said that she thought it was a good summary where we are.

GK also thought it was a fair report as well.

Meeting Closed to receive Public Questions

A resident said that can I safely say with the discussion about the loan that this will only come about if a decision to go for a new hall and therefore significant monies are going to be raised.

BL responded, when you say a loan, the Parish Council at any point can raise money by a loan for either one of the village hall projects.

The resident said that the paper in relation to the village hall proposals, there has been a lot of discussion relating to the finance bit about the loans, presumably with the village hall proposal, a loan should be out of the question.

AL said that from her point of view if we went for one other than this, the middle size or a large one, we would definitely need a loan as there would be no way we could raise that sort of money. AL said that if we looked at the options here, this might be something we could fund raise for, but obviously we would have to look at what we were going to do and maybe we have a small loan to achieve something i.e., a small extension.

The resident said that it would be devastating for the Parish, so in your decision making as to what proposal you go for should consider not taking out a loan and not burden the Parish with financial debt.

BL responded if we are talking about this hall, we might, I don't know, but may have opportunities for grants as well as use of some earmark reserves held for the village hall project.

A resident asked whether the Parish Council could not make a commitment to going forward for a proposal and not committing the Parish Council taking out a loan?. That means raising money for the refurbishment work for this building is sought raising the money rather than taking out a loan. Basically it should be a no no for the Parish Council to be taking out a loan.

Another resident said that it should be a last resort, not a first resort and because I was on the Fund Raising Committee there are on occasions loans that are interest free for village halls. As we had this as one option that we could have looked at for the refurbishment and the new village hall, so I would not necessarily discount the loan, but I would consider it as a last resort. I was disappointed that the stats started at £50k, may be £10k or £20k.

BL explained the figures were designed just to illustrate the impact if the £50k loan has a £14 increase to the precept.

A resident said that you could do this as a last resort and try not to saddle the Parish with debt.

BL said that the situation is so critical whatever we do, we must ask the taxpayers for their approval in my opinion.

The Clerk pointed out that in the last twelve months there was a government grant available for upgrading village halls, but the government wanted 80% funds from the Parish Council and the government would provide 20% funding, so this was not feasible as the amount required from the Parish Council was so high.

A resident said that there were earlier ideas about getting a grant such as the national lottery, the previous groups worked out the number of grants available were quite small particularly to Parish Councils.

BL said that everyone must appreciate that figures that may have been looked at five years ago are no longer relevant as every goal post has changed, and what I feel is that this Council does not have a mandate to look at anything else without hearing what the taxpayers want, whether the burden falls to the taxpayers or whether we are lucky enough to get money to build a hall, it still has to be financed, running the project, they might pay for the physical building but it got to be managed and all that is going to increase the cost and I don't feel this Council has any mandate from the taxpayers who may end up taking the burden.

BL said that as you alluded to earlier, I think there is no mandate from the village for a new hall or a bigger hall. BL said that we cannot confirm or deny whether there was any mandate at any point in time and today, here and now we need a mandate in my view.

A resident said that the Parish Council had managed to reduce the precept last time.

BL explained it was marginally reduced last time.

The resident commented that you said it may increase due to the true costs of running the Parish Council, so how did the Parish Council manage to decrease the precept?.

The Clerk explained that the precept was reduced as funds were taken from the general reserves to fund the current year's budget. The Clerk advised that in previous years the Parish Council did not pay for all servicing and maintenance to meet statutory requirements, and this will be the first year the Parish Council will know how much it costs to run the Parish Council.

A resident said that the precept in the past, maybe five or six years was artificially high because a chunk of money was put aside for the village hall.

BL said that the result of that was we realised things needed correcting and we have spent that money, so yes it was advance collected with the intention to be used for the village hall project, but because things were allowed to fall into disrepair we have had to use substantial amounts of money that was in the bank this time last year to get our house in order legally and meet statutory minimum requirements.

BL said that once money was taken from the taxpayer and labelled village hall that it shall only ever be used for that, but it is taxpayers money whether it was acquired five years ago and put in the bank or acquired today, it is still taxpayers money.

A resident asked whether the separate account was named village hall account?.

The Clerk said that on paper it was classed as the money allocated to the village hall project held in a Barclay's account.

DC asked if the bank account is still there?.

The Clerk said yes.

DC said that there was about £80k and two other gift amounts in the account, I have never seen it so I don't know what it was.

A resident said that there was a grant of £8,400 for the village hall.

The Clerk confirmed the grant of £8,400 following checking with Wealden District Council was a payment due to covid due to the loss of income to the village hall and this is in writing from Wealden District Council.

A resident said that being part of the fund raising group, certain individuals managed to get a small grant.

The Clerk confirmed all funds received for the village hall have been accounted for back to 2017.

A resident said that on the issue of planning which has been challenged in the other history report regarding your recent meeting with planning, and the fact you haven't got a record of the previous planning meetings taken place with the previous Parish Council, is it possible for the minutes of that planning meeting to be made available?.

The Clerk said that notes had been taken of the planning meeting and they can be made available on the website.

BL confirmed the Parish Council has a detailed list of donations received for the village hall. BL explained the Parish Council can use the precept element for anything the Parish Council wishes to use the money on. BL said that we do appreciate that the money sat in the bank, some funds were donations and the Parish Council should respect that any donation is for the village hall.

The Clerk confirmed a review was undertaken of all the funds held in the Barclay's bank account for the village hall, and the now chairman of Hooe Village Hall Community Group came to more or less the same conclusions as the Clerk as to what money was held in the bank account and where it had been received from. The Clerk explained in terms of the money raised there are very few donations, it mainly comprises of precept payments, grants and money raised via the coffee mornings etc. which was carried out by the then Parish Councillors and put through the Parish Councils accounts being money that belonged to the Parish Council, and subsequently the coffee mornings etc. are now carried out under the voluntary group known as the Hooe Village Community Group.

A resident said that they were aware of some people that gave money and may be unhappy about that.

The Clerk said that she had spoken to the internal auditor about the village hall donations and he advised if a donation was given for a specific project and we know who the person is, the money can be refunded. The Clerk explained the internal

auditor said that where the person is not known, the Parish Council is within their legal rights to spend the money as long as it is to benefit the village.

BL said that I think we would want to spend the money that was genuinely raised for a village hall project to be spent on something else unrelated.

A resident said that the village hall process has been going on for over thirty years, what would you have done if my aunty had not have given you that piece of ground?.

BL said that he didn't know.

The resident asked why you are taking so long to get it done.

BL said it was his view entirely.

The resident said that you must speed up the process and stop the excuses. A resident asked how long do you think it will take to work out the true cost of running the Council?.

BL said that we the Parish Council will be in a vastly better position in the run up to Christmas.

Meeting Re-opened

BL said that the Clerk's proposed motion needed to be considered or any other motion proposed.

BL said that it will work out thirty pence per taxpayer per hour for an independent review of the Parish Council's finance and the report to tell us quite clearly what hurdles the Parish Council will face in pursuing any of the options that are outlined in the report.

AL said that it would provide us with evidence whether the information contained in Steve's report is accurate and appropriate to the projects proposed.

The Clerk expressed her concern that if you go out to the village and they come back and say I would like a village hall, but you then find out the business plan does not stack up.

BL said that we need to be supported in any future decision by an independent review of this report, otherwise there will always be the potential for the accusation that we have done what we wanted to do, and we haven't listened to anyone. BL stated we would have more credibility than what is being alleged we have at the moment.

AL proposed and GK seconded. SC abstained and all remaining Councillors agreed.

Resolved that Mulberry & Co be appointed at £65.00 per hour + VAT to undertake a review of the Appraisal of Options for the Village Hall Report based on the instructions recommended in the Clerk's Briefing Note.

BL asked the Clerk if we could give the public 21 days' notice of the next date of the Village Hall Committee meeting.

The Clerk responded that four weeks' notice can be given to the public regarding the next meeting date but the legal summons for Councillors would still be issued in the normal manner.

DC said that if the Clerk had read the Parish News you would have known the meeting clashed with the History Group meeting and other people could have attended.

The Clerk explained the business of the Parish Council takes precedent against what is going on in the village. The Clerk said that she had no knowledge of the dates of events taking place in the village but will take this into consideration where possible for the next Village Hall Project Committee meeting.

The parish council meeting finished at 9.16pm

In accordance with The Data Protection Act 2018 all attendees of the meeting are hereby notified that the meeting will be recorded as an aide memoire for the clerk when compiling the minutes. The recordings are held securely and are deleted after the resolution that the minutes are a true and correct record. Members of the public should be aware that being present at a meeting of the Council or one of its committees or sub-committees will be deemed as the person having given consent to being recorded (photograph, film or audio recording) at the meeting, by any person present. A person or persons recording the parish meeting are reminded that the "Public Session" period may not be part of the formal meeting and that they should take legal advice for themselves as to their rights to make any recording during that period.

Supporting Documents

THE HISTORY OF THE VILLAGE HALL PROJECT

In 2010 the Parish Council at that time, led by Dick Carey, recognised that the village hall, which was almost 100 years old, was beginning to show significant structural and operational problems, so the Council began discussing two possible options: either refurbishment, or demolition and construction of a new hall.

In the summer of 2011 a full parish consultation was carried out with the majority of responders agreeing that the current hall was not fit for purpose, the preference being to construct a new hall to replace the existing hall.

It was therefore decided that, rather than throw good money after bad in an attempt to “tart up” the current hall, it would make more sense to replace the hall with a new building able to meet the current and future needs of the village.

Throughout 2012 and 2013 there were a number of discussions concerning construction of a building on the footprint of the current hall, but then in 2014 a village resident who owned a plot of land adjacent to the hall gifted this piece of unregistered land to the parish.

In Councillor Crawhurst’s report the word “allotment” has erroneously been used when referring to this piece of land, but in fact it was referred to as a garden plot by the owner, and had never been designated or registered as an allotment, so there would be no need to find another piece of land elsewhere in the village for an allotment as stated in the report.

This additional piece of land offered new possibilities, but it took the next two years to effect the transfer and register it, during which time any plans for a new hall were necessarily put on hold.

However, the then Parish Council decided that it would be prudent to begin to build up a fund which, together with grants, donations, and income from other activities, would enable the project to move forward.

From the 2014/15 financial year, as reported in the Parish Council minutes, a proportion of the precept was transferred into a separate account specifically for that purpose, and this practice continued for subsequent years.

It is standard practice throughout the U.K. for councils to set aside a proportion of their precepts to prepare for major strategic projects.

In July 2016 the Parish Council proposed that a public meeting be held to collect ideas from the community, and this took place on 12th December 2016.

The conclusion from that meeting, which was reported in the Parish Council minutes of January 2017, was that the preferred option was to have a new hall built in order to provide a facility which would be environmentally friendly, fully accessible, was suitable for both current and future activities, and would have adequate parking.

It was suggested that it could be constructed on part of the recreation ground area which was not used for sporting activities and would not impact on the enjoyment of villagers who use the field for recreation, dog-walking, etc, and this would enable the current site to be sold for a small-scale affordable housing development which would provide a significant contribution to the cost of constructing a new hall.

A number of possible options for a new hall were reviewed such as the scheme drawn up by Bernard Baker, a local architect, although this was dismissed for design and cost reasons.

It became apparent that in order to obtain significant grants from various organisations it was necessary to first ensure that we had generated a reasonable level of funding ourselves.

With monies from the precept, a grant of £8500 from RegenSW, donations from individuals, the Hooe Open Group, and the Hooe Old Motor Club, events such as the regular coffee mornings, Open Gardens, prize draws, beetle drives, etc., the funds held in the account destined for the new hall eventually reached approximately £90,000.

Unfortunately, with the Covid pandemic, there was little progress on the project for a time, although some informal discussions were held with Wealden Planning personnel who indicated that, providing the playing area of the recreation

ground was not affected, a new village hall on the recreation ground could be considered, as could a small-scale housing development on the existing hall site.

A feasibility study was carried out for a new hall by local professionals, and following an Extraordinary Parish Council Meeting in May 2021 a second parish consultation in the form of an exhibition took place in June 2021 which included draft plans, a model, options and ideas, and historical information.

Flyers had been hand-delivered to each household in the Parish prior to this event to ensure that all interested parties had an opportunity to put forward their points of view, and a number of useful suggestions which had been made by residents were gradually incorporated into the plans.

The responses from this consultation reinforced the opinion that the majority favoured constructing a new, purpose-built hall on the recreation ground site with the existing hall site being sold for a small-scale housing development.

As Councillor Crawhurst's report says, during 2021, to assist in deliberations, visits were made to some village halls in the area to get ideas of possible designs, costs, operational issues, etc, and it was also decided to split the village hall project team into two, with one group responsible for coming up with a workable design for the new hall and the other group responsible for the funding.

Some progress was being made by both teams, but a design put forward by the build/technical team was viewed by the funding team as being impractical on the grounds of cost, and it was suggested that an earlier, more affordable design, which had been drawn up for a new building on the current hall site be looked at again with a view to modifying it for the recreation ground site.

It was anticipated that the cost for this would be in the region of £500 - 600,000, at least 50% of which would have come from the sale of the existing site, with the balance coming from the £90,000 "pot" already built up plus lottery funding, grants, match funding, etc.

This is where matters stood when, in early 2022, it became clear to a number of Parish Councillors who were closely involved with the new hall project, that they were unable to continue as Councillors and resigned.

Councillor Crawhurst's report suggests that there is insufficient demand on the use of the hall to warrant the construction of a new hall.

It is true to say that use of the hall has diminished; when the current Parish Council closed the hall existing clubs and societies needed to find alternative venues, and, sadly, new regulations and costs which have been introduced have meant that these groups have kept away, but this is not to say that users wouldn't return given the right conditions and environment.

It is also true to say that the need for a larger hall will not be driven by village expansion and an increased population, but the hall needs to be suitable for the existing population, and it is disappointing to see local groups now meeting in Ninfield.

The report tends to talk down the possibility of attracting new users, but the use of community venues by people who do not live in the parish would increase income for the parish and thus reduce the cost of running a community venue.

It is entirely possible that, given an attractive and affordable venue and effective publicity, new users could be encouraged to rent the hall for weddings, birthday parties, barn dances, clubs and societies, perhaps a nursery school, and so on.

Many venues have a two-tier system of charging, one for village residents and another for external users.

With regard to Planning, Councillor Crawhurst's comments on a meeting with Wealden planners are completely contrary to the advice and suggestions received previously, and the suggestion that WDC would only allow one property on the existing village hall site is entirely at odds with the proposal for a small-scale affordable housing development of 3-4 houses which had been greeted with enthusiasm previously by planners providing the properties were designed sympathetically.

With regard to finance, Councillor Crawhurst rightly points out that successful fund raising had been undertaken over recent years; as noted above, a fund of approximately £90,000 had been set aside to contribute to a new hall, but sadly, the majority of this has now been used for refurbishment of the aged pavilion and the existing hall, and according to the report a further £90,000 would now be required to carry on the refurbishment of the hall!

Councillor Crawhurst has argued that careful budgeting has enabled the Parish Council to reduce the precept.

This careful budgeting includes deletion of any retention of part of the precept for the village hall and has been accompanied by a reduction in the total funds held by the Parish Council from £164,000 to £74,000, (coincidentally a reduction of £90,000), together with a substantial increase in employees wages.

Councillor Crawhurst's report also suggests that a new build would take several years, as finance permitted; one possibility, which had in fact been previously considered, was a modular build which could facilitate a shorter time-frame. Preliminary discussions had been held with one company who would assume total responsibility for Planning, construction, services and project management, so in fact the Parish Clerk would not have to shoulder all the responsibility as councillor Crawhurst stated.

Councillor Crawhurst's report argues that "loss of a significant part" of the recreation ground to build a new hall would result in a loss of green space.

In fact the area previously identified as a possible location had, until recently, been practically unused for several years.

The report also notes that the existing hall's location is more accessible than alternative locations especially for those who wish to walk to the hall.

In the past there were, in fact, many users who came from outside the cluster of houses around the Red Lion which might be regarded as the "centre" of the village, and walking from the centre of the village to a new hall on the recreation ground would surely not be too onerous.

Furthermore a new, environmentally sustainable building, built to the highest specification possible would, over the life of the building, be more sustainably friendly than continuing to patch up the elderly building.

It has been suggested that perhaps Councillor Crawhurst's report may have been influenced by his desire to see no significant change to the view from his property which is opposite the current village hall.

Chris Bloor

THE HISTORY OF THE VILLAGE HALL PROJECT

Recent survey has shown no structural issue with main structure

In 2010 the Parish Council at that time, led by Dick Carey, recognised that the village hall, which was almost 100 years old, was beginning to show significant structural and operational problems, so the Council began discussing two possible options: either refurbishment, or demolition and construction of a new hall.

what were these - size car parking??

In the summer of 2011 a full parish consultation was carried out with the majority of responders agreeing that the current hall was not fit for purpose, the preference being to construct a new hall to replace the existing hall.

what purpose - it serves well as a village hall

By the PC & not residents

It was therefore decided that, rather than throw good money after bad in an attempt to "tart up" the current hall, it would make more sense to replace the hall with a new building able to meet the current and future needs of the village.

proper maintenance or refurbishment is not this

what future needs - creating additional activities?

Throughout 2012 and 2013 there were a number of discussions concerning construction of a building on the footprint of the current hall, but then in 2014 a village resident who owned a plot of land adjacent to the hall gifted this piece of unregistered land to the parish.

this demonstrates the desire for new for the sake of it as no additional size/function could be added

In Councillor Crawhurst's report the word "allotment" has erroneously been used when referring to this piece of land, but in fact it was referred to as a garden plot by the owner, and had never been designated or registered as an allotment, so there would be no need to find another piece of land elsewhere in the village for an allotment as stated in the report.

is this not a Wealden Planning requirement?

This additional piece of land offered new possibilities, but it took the next two years to effect the transfer and register it, during which time any plans for a new hall were necessarily put on hold.

However, the then Parish Council decided that it would be prudent to begin to build up a fund which, together with grants, donations, and income from other activities, would enable the project to move forward.

From the 2014/15 financial year, as reported in the Parish Council minutes, a proportion of the precept was transferred into a separate account specifically for that purpose, and this practice continued for subsequent years. majority of residents unaware of this increase to Precept & are not in favour of it

It is standard practice throughout the U.K. for councils to set aside a proportion of their precepts to prepare for major strategic projects.

is this correct? misinterpreting requirement for PC's to have reserves for emergencies

this is an 'ad hoc post hoc' justification for increasing Precept

In July 2016 the Parish Council proposed that a public meeting be held to collect ideas from the community, and this took place on 12th December 2016.

The conclusion from that meeting, which was reported in the Parish Council minutes of January 2017, was that the preferred option was to have a new hall built in order to provide a facility which would be environmentally friendly, fully accessible, was suitable for both current and future activities, and would have adequate parking.

By who?

It was suggested that it could be constructed on part of the recreation ground area which was not used for sporting activities and would not impact on the enjoyment of villagers who use the field for recreation, dog-walking, etc, and this would enable the current site to be sold for a small-scale affordable housing development which would provide a significant contribution to the cost of constructing a new hall.

affordable housing not suitable for site as stated Wealdon Planners. Plus new build needs to be constructed before sale of site therefore cost of loan not factored in.

A number of possible options for a new hall were reviewed such as the scheme drawn up by Bernard Baker, a local architect, although this was dismissed for design and cost reasons.

It became apparent that in order to obtain significant grants from various organisations it was

a £1million cost at 2018 prices not including any bridging loans is well above the monies that could be raised by events or available from charities

Adequate research was not undertaken regarding feasibility of this statement - majority of grants available to registered charities & of all those available a maximum of £200k was available
The viability of setting up a village hall charity was not undertaken.

necessary to first ensure that we had generated a reasonable level of funding ourselves. With monies from the precept, a grant of £8500 from RegenSW, donations from individuals, the Hooe Open Group, and the Hooe Old Motor Club, events such as the regular coffee mornings, Open Gardens, prize draws, beetle drives, etc., the funds held in the account destined for the new hall eventually reached **approximately £90,000**. Money raised after 5 years, mostly from an increased Precept so only another 35 years to raise some £600k - a long time for residents to tolerate an increased Precept

Unfortunately, with the Covid pandemic, there was little progress on the project for a time, although some informal discussions were held with Wealden Planning personnel who indicated that, providing the playing area of the recreation ground was not affected, a new village hall on the recreation ground could be considered, as could a small-scale housing development on the existing hall site. There is no written record of these meetings. If Wealdon Planning had these views it is clear that they do not today.

A feasibility study was carried out for a new hall by local professionals, and following an Extraordinary Parish Council Meeting in May 2021 a second parish consultation in the form of an exhibition took place in June 2021 which included draft plans, a model, options and ideas, and historical information. Proposal was not viable as new build did not have enough off street parking & should not have been proposed Flyers had been hand-delivered to each household in the Parish prior to this event to ensure that all interested parties had an opportunity to put forward their points of view, and a number of useful suggestions which had been made by residents were gradually incorporated into the plans.

This is not correct - there were only 31 respondents (from a population of 436) and of the 31 only 6 in favour of proposal as was. The responses from this consultation reinforced the opinion that the majority favoured constructing a new, purpose-built hall on the recreation ground site with the existing hall site being sold for a small-scale housing development.

None of the respondents to the June 2021 exhibited proposal made any comment about housing development

As Councillor Crawhurst's report says, during 2021, to assist in deliberations, visits were made to some village halls in the area to get ideas of possible designs, costs, operational issues, etc, and it was also decided to split the village hall project team into two, with one group responsible for coming up with a workable design for the new hall and the other group responsible for the funding.

Incorrect no design was presented to the funding team - a suggested gross floor area for the Village was given to them

Some progress was being made by both teams, but a design put forward by the build/technical team was viewed by the funding team as being impractical on the grounds of cost, and it was suggested that an earlier, more affordable design, which had been drawn up for a new building on the current hall site be looked at again with a view to modifying it for the recreation ground site.

No such suggestion was put to either team prior to the disbanding of both teams

Based on the design exhibited which required some design corrections which would increase gross floor area & costs. Plus costs for ground works & landscaping & car parking & utilities & vehicle cross over(s) would increase cost estimate by at least 20%

It was anticipated that the cost for this would be in the region of **£500 - 600,000**, at least 50% of which would have come from the sale of the existing site, with the balance coming from the £90,000 "pot" already built up plus lottery funding, grants, match funding, etc.

This is where matters stood when, in early 2022, it became clear to a number of Parish Councillors who were closely involved with the new hall project, that they were unable to continue as Councillors and resigned.

in essence these councillors gave up because of what ??????; and one of them had only been voted on the council days (not weeks) before!

Councillor Crawhurst's report suggests that there is insufficient demand on the use of the hall to warrant the construction of a new hall.

It is true to say that use of the hall has diminished; when the current Parish Council closed the hall existing clubs and societies needed to find alternative venues, and, sadly, new regulations and costs which have been introduced have meant that these groups have kept away, but this is not to say that users wouldn't return given the right conditions and environment.

For urgent repairs required because the hall had been allowed to get into a state of disrepair by previous PC

coffee mornings & history group only

not new regulations but existing ones to be complied with

It is also true to say that the need for a larger hall will not be driven by village expansion and an increased population, but the hall needs to be suitable for the existing population, and it is disappointing to see local groups now meeting in Ninfield.

what local groups? Yes residents are going to Ninfield Groups as there are more of them, and they are better organised

The report tends to talk down the possibility of attracting new users, but the use of community venues by people who do not live in the parish would increase income for the parish and thus

reduce the cost of running a community venue.

It is entirely possible that, given an attractive and affordable venue and effective publicity, new users could be encouraged to rent the hall for weddings, birthday parties, barn dances, clubs and societies, perhaps a nursery school, and so on.

These activities would require a new village hall on the Recreation Ground which has been demonstrated is not affordable. These activities may not be attracted to the existing Hall, in the same way the Coffee Mornings & History Group are not.

Many venues have a two-tier system of charging, one for village residents and another for external users.

yes they are, so how was previous advice given?

With regard to Planning, Councillor Crawhurst's comments on a meeting with Wealden planners are completely contrary to the advice and suggestions received previously, and the suggestion that WDC would only allow one property on the existing village hall site is entirely at odds with the proposal for a small-scale affordable housing development of 3-4 houses which had been greeted with enthusiasm previously by planners providing the properties were designed sympathetically.

yes it is because from a planning perspective 3-4 affordable houses are completely out of character to the village

highly unlikely

It would seem that previous discussions with 'the planners' was with a specific individual who did not have the appropriate authority

With regard to finance, Councillor Crawhurst rightly points out that successful fund-raising had been undertaken over recent years; as noted above, a fund of approximately £90,000 had been set aside to contribute to a new hall.

This money was transferred to a new account by the Parish Clerk and sadly, the majority of it has now been used for refurbishment of the aged pavilion and the existing hall, and according to the report a further £90,000 would now be required to carry on the refurbishment of the hall!

Necessary refurbishment because the Hall had been allowed to fall in to disrepair by previous PC and not safe for public use.

Councillor Crawhurst has argued that careful budgeting has enabled the Parish Council to reduce the precept.

increase in Precept for new hall not endorsed by residents

This "careful budgeting" includes deletion of any retention of part of the precept for a new village hall and has been accompanied by a reduction in the total funds held by the Parish Council from £164,000 to £74,000, (coincidentally a reduction of £90,000), together with a substantial increase in employees wages.

Councillor Crawhurst's report also suggests that a new build would take several years, as finance permitted; one possibility, which had in fact been previously considered, was a modular build which could facilitate a shorter time-frame.

this would only facilitate faster build time not speed up finance

Preliminary discussions had been held with one company who would assume total responsibility for Planning, construction, services and project management, so in fact the Parish Clerk would not have to shoulder all the responsibility as councillor Crawhurst stated.

Not advisable to have contractor responsible for Planning. Normal contractor would undertake construction, services & management as standard.

Councillor Crawhurst's report argues that "loss of a significant part" of the recreation ground to build a new hall would result in a loss of green space.

In fact the area previously identified as a possible location had, until recently, been practically unused for several years.

but is still a green site never previously built on

The report also notes that the existing hall's location is more accessible than alternative locations especially for those who wish to walk to the hall.

In the past there were, in fact, many users who came from outside the cluster of houses around the Red Lion which might be regarded as the "centre" of the village, and walking from the centre of the village to a new hall on the recreation ground would surely not be too onerous.

It is during winter with dark nights & no public footpath to the Rec .

Furthermore a new, environmentally sustainable building, built to the highest specification possible and with adequate parking would, over the life of the building, be more sustainably friendly than continuing to patch up the elderly building.

It has been suggested that perhaps Councillor Crawhurst's report may have been influenced by his desire to see no significant change to the view from his property which is opposite the current village hall....

o

an unwarranted & unsubstantiated comment

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The sentiment is correct, however, the build cost for highly sustainable building (with minimum energy running costs) would greatly increase the build cost identified in the Appraisal and would take decades to offset the equivalent running costs of the existing village hall. Only the grandchildren of current residents would see the benefits by which time the technology & construction of the new build will be out of date & need to be replaced