

Hooe Parish Council

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Minutes of the Village Hall Project Committee Meeting held on 12th February 2024

Attendees: Cllr A. Loyd (AL), Cllr L. Povey (LP), Cllr G. Kirk (GK), Cllr D. Carey (DC), Cllr R. Clifton (RC)
Cllr B. Leonard (BL)

In attendance: J. Warrener – Clerk (Proper Officer/RFO)

23 members of the public present. Meeting opened at 7.07pm

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.

Any other question should be put in writing to the Clerk in advance of the next meeting. Any questions raised for items listed on the agenda that cannot be answered at the Council meeting will be brought forward to the next Council meeting for response.

BL reported to the meeting that he would allow public questions before the meeting and will suspend the Council meeting to hear further comments before a decision is made.

A resident raised their concern that a community asset may close. The resident accepted the running costs needs to be subsidised to survive but the Parish Council must do its utmost to keep it open and those that use the church should come back. The resident said that if a consultation is to take place, the Parish Council needs to do some work to find out who would like to use the village hall so it can reduce the costs before you do a consultation. The resident said that if you are going to close the village hall you need to say why, and if we keep it open how much it is going to cost as all. The resident stated they personally did not want to see the village hall close and do not want to lose a village asset. The resident went on to say they understood the financial difficulties, but if the history group, open group came back, but there are insufficient people coming, the Parish Council will have to come up with ideas to encourage new groups to start up.

BL replied that parking is part of the issue, and if the village hall is renovated that may go along way to increase the usage of the village hall.

A resident reported he was a former Councillor and was in favour of the village hall being on the recreation grounds subject to it having sports facilities, but the previous regime did not want that, so now we are back to this. The resident said that it will be sad as there are many postcards that have this village hall on it.

End of public questions

Business Transacted

1. **To receive apologies and reasons for absence** in accordance with the Local Government Act 1972 S85 (1).

Cllr. Stephen Crawhurst has declined to take part until a decision is reached on the village hall

2. **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 register of interests should be notified to the clerk.

None declared.

3. To approve and sign the minutes of the Village Hall Project Committee meeting held on the 17th August 2023 as a true record.

Motion carried.

Resolved that the minutes of the 17th August 2023 are signed as a true record.

Matters For Consideration and Resolution

4. To discuss the options for the community consultation for the village hall and agree any actions required.

BL asked all Councillors whether they had read all the accompanying documents for this meeting. All Councillors responded yes.

BL went through section one of the Clerk's report and requested that a motion be put forward to accept Cllr. Crawhurst's report and that it is included as part of the decision-making process.

Motion carried.

Resolved that Cllr. Crawhurst's report is accepted as written and that it is included as part of the decision-making process.

BL recommended the Committee discussed the new build option first, if the Committee chose to accept the new build option the two remaining options will become redundant, and if we reject the new build option then the renovation and disposal options remain relevant. BL asked the Committee does everyone agree with this approach? All Councillors agreed.

BL explained he gave equal time to each option and the third option developed more significantly once he had completed the first two options. BL said that he was not convinced that either option was fully justified, nor could he guarantee one of these could be the only answer, and that is why the third option seemed to gain a lot of weight in his report.

BL wanted to remind Councillors that we have only received three responses from the public since the document was issued. BL categorised two of the responses as frustration with the Parish Council to move on and make the decision and one response reluctantly said that the village hall should be sold. BL added that given the supposed ground swell of support for one of these options, in particular the new build, I am surprised by the lack of response or further submissions from those supporters. BL suggests that Councillors may conclude from this they now have all the necessary information from the community and what we have tonight as well.

BL asked if any Councillor have any comments or questions about the report?

AL said the report was in depth and well researched.

DC said that it is in the minutes that the Parish Council had voted to build a village hall on the recreation grounds.

BL said that to his knowledge no Parish Council has voted to do this.

The Clerk advised such a decision has not been made since she has taken up the post of Clerk, and that any decision that may have been made at a Council meeting can be overturned after six months.

DC said that at that time he supported a new build on the recreation grounds if it had sports facilities.

The Committee meeting was closed at 7.23pm to hear the public views before a motion is to be made to accept or reject a new village hall.

A resident said that having been part of the Parish Council, his recollection was that the reason why a new village hall was talked about at the recreation grounds, was that the existing village hall was to be sold as a building plot which subsidised the building of a new village hall. The resident's recollection is the plot next door was granted to the Parish Council on the understanding that it would either be used to enhance this village hall, or it would be sold in order to provide funds for a new village hall elsewhere. The resident said that DC has pointed out there aren't the funds to build a new village hall here. The resident suggested that his opinion will be perhaps to refurbish and to do the utmost to maintain the village hall for the village and the people.

A resident accepted the point that the village hall should not be run as a business, but the Parish Council must have a business mind in order to generate the funds to run a village hall. The resident said that the Parish Council needs to promote the village hall to generate business and accepted that the community will never use the hall a hundred percent of the time, and clearly, we would want other people to use it including businesses.

Meeting reopened at 7.28pm

BL asked whether any Councillor would wish to make any further comments. No comments were made.

A motion was put forward by BL, does Hooe Parish Council accept the building of a new village hall on the recreation grounds.

Motion carried to refuse a new build.

Resolved that a new village hall will not be built on the recreation grounds.

BL reported that the section 5.5 of the Clerk's report is to consider a motion to hold a community consultation on the remaining two options, renovation or disposal. BL recommended to the meeting that it must be a full renovation with parking or nothing, otherwise close it. BL stated that this could mean we could have a beautifully restored historic building, well maintained at taxpayers' cost that sits empty and the taxpayers are paying for it in the long term.

BL asked whether Councillors support this as the long term renovation option?

AL said that she would like to see the village hall renovated and used. AL would like to promote the hall not only to those within Hooe and the surrounding village as well, have a look at what the villagers would like to see here such as quizzes which are well attended in the pub, table tennis and try and get someone to run a sports club as there is nothing here for the youth of the village. AL suggested if we renovated the hall, we would have to go hand in hand publicising it that it is a usable space that people can come and use.

DC said that it is not up to the Parish Council to run anything, it is for the villagers to run and organise things, but we have to try to increase the usage and the work to the village hall doesn't all need doing at once.

BL commented we don't want the windows to fall out before we fix them. BL explained it is four and half years since the structural survey was carried out which indicated the work would cost around £155,000, not all to be done immediately.

BL explained that Ashburnham village hall is in a similar situation to Hooe, but Ashburnham village hall have a backer who coughs up 75% of their money, but if they didn't have this, they would be running into what I call a slow decline. BL said that you have said yourself you see how black mould appears on the wall every year.

DC replied it is due to lack of use.

BL commented that this hall has sat empty for most of January, it has got black mould on the walls, it is not heated as we can't afford the heating. BL added do we accept if we go for a renovation option it won't be lets turn the heating off in January even if it is not being used, we will have to look after the building and be proactive in repairing it, we won't wait for things to fall down and break and that costs money. BL stated if we are promoting a renovation option to the community, we either go for it or we don't.

BL explained by going for it we hope it will generate more use of the hall, we hope putting in parking and broadband will promote more use. BL indicated all these things cost money but at the end of the day we may have a beautifully historic building with no use. BL said that if we listen to the comments made tonight from people who say they are really sad about the thought of the hall closing, I would like to not just ask those people but to ask everyone in the room when was the last time they used this hall, not just to come to meetings, and when is the next time they are going to use this hall.

DC said that is too simple. DC explained the village hall has been managed by volunteers most of the time since the war and the Parish Council took it back about ten years ago and my sister ran it for many years and managed to show a little profit. DC explained in those days you went cap in hand to get a donation for the village hall.

RC said that he has heard a lot over the last three or four months and it is about parking. RC added that this would give the village hall a tremendous lift and the band has played here every Tuesday for years and have always had to park on the grass which is not good, and we can have a car park which is critical to allow the hall to grow.

The Clerk remarked that the auditor had pointed out last year that the Parish Council must start planning ahead and not keep fire fighting waiting until the next crisis and should start setting aside money each year for works required.

BL explained the motion on the table is to hold a community consultation to ask the community for a mandate to tell us what road they want us to take.

DC explained lots of people have lived in the village all their lives and believes there are a lot of people out there want the village hall to stay.

LP said that you have to understand the implications of keeping the hall, there are costs associated and it takes a lot of organisation and effort to market the hall if we get it back into a condition that people want to use it. LP said that this is no mean feat.

DC commented that the problem is there are no volunteers.

AL added that I know through family and friends and for organisations such as league of friends, rotaries are all desperate for new members because people are not coming through to take over the mantle of the older people that are retiring.

BL stated it isn't the Parish Councils job to fill this hall with fun activities.

DC replied no not at all.

BL added some people may suggest it is part of our job, but our job is to look at the finances, to look at what is reasonable and to renovate if that is the option we are going to take. BL commented it is not the Parish Council's job to fill it with people, it's the community's job and I don't see very much of our community doing that, and have reservations they will ever do that.

DC said he strongly disagreed with BL's view.

BL added out of four hundred voters that live in Hooe, how many will want to use the village hall, it is not our job to fill this hall, our job is to provide it as a facility and take care of the finances.

BL explained what I am trying to gauge from Councillors is whether we going to go all in and renovate it, as that has cost implications. BL added we should do everything to obtain grants, we will do everything we can to get taxpayers money down, but what we do not want to do is to leave it until the roof collapses, keep the heating off and let the black mould grow, so we need to do a proper job to keep it functionable, usable, a modern village hall with parking that will come at a cost.

BL indicated that the consultation that will go out cannot give people much detail as it can only inform us what path they want us to go down. BL explained that path may take us down several other paths so we can't keep going back to the community, we need a mandate from them to do this or close it.

DC suggested renovate can mean anything.

BL agreed it does, it means don't let it fall into decline, it means improve it.

GK asked whether we could work out a ballpark figure of the costs to say for the roof or heating in the winter to give people an idea how much council tax they will have to pay?

BL advised you know how much work goes into producing plans, producing a model and what ifs, ideally we want to get out a consultation quickly and we have no idea really what four hundred people that pay their council tax want us to do. BL said that in my opinion we have never known that.

GK said that if the community voted to keep the hall, then do we go down that route, or if people don't want to pay that amount of council tax, can it be sold?

BL responded that the consultation cannot be too specific, but it can't say it won't cost you anything.

GK mentioned in the past some people in the village were happy to sell this village hall as a building plot.

BL replied that we are missing the point that previous Parish Councils have been quite happy to let the village hall fall into decline. BL added that even the renovation option in my report is not insignificant, we are not talking about £20,000, we are talking about a six figure sum. BL suggested it could be £100,000 or £200,000, it is going to be a lot of money, not necessarily spent immediately but may be over a five or ten year period.

BL indicated that we have to say to the community do you want us to go all in for the renovation to provide a life time of this building for the next twenty five to fifty years.

RC said that people sitting here must be interested in the village hall otherwise they wouldn't come, and several have come up with ideas. RC suggested to lose the village hall is drastic and without it we will only be half a village.

BL replied we have no evidence from the council taxpayers of Hooe what they want to do, so we must ask them. BL added if it is a full renovation the council taxpayers may either say I am prepared to pay for it or not, and if you can get me grants and save some money great, but if you can't I still want you to renovate it. BL reminded everyone the Parish Council has a fiduciary duty to make sure we are not spending money on things we don't really need. BL said that I do not consider we have a mandate to proceed down that path.

BL added that there is still the argument if there are no long-term prospects for the use of the village hall, that it should be sold and we have a duty to consider the long-term impact on the council taxpayers, it is the Parish Council's responsibility to hold a community consultation on a renovation or disposal option.

Meeting closed at 8.04pm.

A resident raised a concern that one of the things you are suggesting in the community consultation is that the Parish Council spends a shed load of money all at once to put this hall right. The resident suggests this implies the building is falling down, all the work doesn't need doing at once, it is not in a bad condition, so if you are to send out a community consultation document stating that a load of money needs to be spent on this hall, quite frankly this is misleading.

BL said that this is not what I am saying, we are not going to wait until it breaks and be proactive and have a plan to get the work done over a two year, five year or ten year plan. BL pointed out that lots of people say there are grants out there, but the problem with grants they tend to be available for a short window of opportunity and until the money runs out, so unless you are ready with a plan, then say a grant comes up to help say with the new windows, we cannot just do the work on a plan as there is no time. BL also explained that many grants need seed money as a contribution towards the grant.

BL explained it is not a case of to borrow a load of money and do it all, it is a case of asking the community that if we need to borrow money in the future for a realistic planned refurbishment of parts of this building at different times, we have the mandate from the local community to do this.

The resident responded that when a consultation goes out it should not give people a false impression as you have been giving us this evening. The resident also said that it would help if you gave us an idea of what sort of money you are talking about, because again you can't send out a consultation and expect people to say yes and spend loads of money.

BL informed the resident that at our next meeting if this motion passes, we will be debating the document that is to be sent out to the residents.

AL suggested it is made clear that it is a planned renovation over a period of years.

A resident asked that the word renovation should not be used as people will think that it will be costing lots of money, the word improvements is better. The resident said that she thought the facilities are for the benefit of the local community being the core function of the Parish Council, so in her view it is the Parish Council's responsibility to improve it or replace it. The resident indicated if you go down that route of selling the village hall, are you going to replace it with something like the current village hall?

BL acknowledged this is going to be difficult explaining this to the community.

A resident said that a lot of money has been wasted on plans etc. over a number of years just deciding what to do and why is this hall not being used, it always use to be.

A resident requested that everyone should ask people if they are thinking of running a group, and this should be asked as part of the consultation.

BL said that he hoped that by producing this report it would spark this type of debate as I have not seen it since joining the Parish Council in May.

The Clerk commented that the kitchen is not up to the legal standard, so bookings are lost on some enquiries received.

BL said that he deliberately put his report out a month before this meeting and he really hoped people who had ideas, reasons, supporters that we claim to have about why we want a village hall, would lobby the Parish Council and say I want to do this. BL stated that by sending out the report was to try and incite debate and it has been woefully lacking in my opinion since I joined the Parish Council.

A resident suggested there is a difficult question for a lot of people, you all know there is a split in the village, and she believes we must address this. The resident said that with your point raised that there has not been a lot of discussion about the village hall here, it is because there is a lot of discussion outside this room, but at the moment the hall is not being used and the church is. The resident explained she would love to have half down the church and half down here and to have the coffee morning at the church and coffee mornings down here, she would love to have the history group here when its cold in the winter and having it down the church in the summer and this means the Parish Council needs to talk with the Church, the Hooe Village Community Group and talk to other groups. The resident said that she finds the split very sad.

BL said that the Parish Council cannot force anyone to do anything.

A resident said that with my church hat on, the church is your building, it is open every single day and everyone is invited to use it. A resident said that when the village hall reopened, we were fully expecting everyone to move back to the village hall and when they didn't, we did suggest that we did it alternately, as the church we cannot throw people out, so it is a difficult situation.

A resident said that the nice thing about the village hall is that it is in the centre of the village which is important.

A resident requested that the thirty percent response required must be made clear on the consultation form.

The meeting reopened at 8.35pm.

BL asked whether Councillors wished to debate this further, the response from all Councillors was no.

BL proposed a motion as set out in 5.5 in the Clerk's report.

Motion carried.

Resolved to hold a community consultation to refurbish or sell the village hall and to instruct the Clerk to draft a community consultation within four weeks for consideration by the Village Hall Project Committee.

The Village Hall Project Committee meeting finished at 8.39 pm.

Signed: Chairman: Cllr. Bill Leonard

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