

# **Open letter to Shutford Parish Councillors from The Chairman of the Village Hall Management Committee and Trustees**

## **Village Hall Development Plan part funded by a Public Works Loan**

I attended your meeting held in the Village Hall on the evening of 16<sup>th</sup> September 2015 to hear the outcome of our request for an application for a Public Works Loan of £150,000 to part fund the rebuilding of the Village Hall on the existing site. Other members of the public were also present. This request was the culmination of more than 3 years of work to devise a plan to improve the 60 year old facility and bring it up to date and provide for the future needs of our community in Shutford.

The original impetus to do this came from the village survey to create a village plan for the next 25 years held two years ago, showing an overwhelming community support to either renovate or rebuild the village hall. The Village Hall Committee had already obtained a grant to part fund an energy audit which was carried out by Oxford Brookes University in summer 2012. The outcome of this was predictable, suggesting low energy lighting, attention to heat insulation and draughts etc. The former was attended to immediately, but wall insulation was very expensive and would change the appearance of the building. A better heating control system was installed in January 2014 with the help of a Council grant and local expertise while lower electricity costs were achieved through a much better deal from a local energy supplier.

All of this was not getting to grips with two overarching and much more fundamental problems. The hall has no disabled access, which had already caused it to lose valuable income from use as a polling

station, and the building with its asbestos roof has a limited life anyway.

Rebuilding eventually seemed the only way forward, but this would be very expensive and the Trustees felt that even with grant assistance, this would never exceed more than 50% of the capital required to undertake the task. Local fund raising to meet the cost would probably take decades, time that we didn't have.

Then last year three events came together that changed everything. Firstly a new design of rebuild that provided three advantages at very little extra cost reinvigorated the Trustees to pursue this more fundamental solution. Firstly, by dropping the footings and providing a lay by in front of the building, disabled access becomes possible, a higher roof is achieved and loading and unloading no longer interferes with traffic flow. These are tangible, real and permanent benefits to the viability of the facility. Secondly, a pledge of £100,000 was made by two incredibly generous village residents and thirdly the possibility of using a Public Works Loan, for a village hall project, was amply demonstrated by a number of organisations in Oxfordshire and is advocated by Oxfordshire Rural Community Council. This led the SVH Committee to apply for planning permission, for which the Parish Council agreed to be the applicant to reduce the cost. Planning permission was granted and the design praised by the planning authorities with a proviso regarding usage, which being primarily for villagers, is not a problem.

Presentations were made to your council by another community building management, demonstrating the way that their new building had attracted increased usage and how a PWL had facilitated their project. It was after this event that the SVH Committee asked the Parish Council to go ahead with an application for a PWL. The SVH

Team were also supportive of a second independent village survey to ascertain backing for our project that produced 57% in favour.

The SVH Committee is also confident that all the building costs likely to be encountered would be covered by known resources plus the PWL of £150,000. The future prognosis also shows that all the running costs of the new hall would be easily covered by rental income and a good margin generated even if only a small fraction of the new expected usage actually materialised.

At the previous Council meeting indication was given that an application would be made following satisfactory answers to a list of questions that went well beyond the requirements of the loan board and included a number of questions that could only be answered speculatively, such as prospective future use. The questions were received less than a month ago, leaving our Committee little time to reply. The SVH Committee spent two weeks compiling the answers which would have satisfied the most exacting standards, so you can appreciate the shock we had when your council voted 5 – 2 against applying for the loan. It is the basis for this rejection that I and the Trustees respectfully request a detailed explanation. The Village Hall Management Committee is surprised and disappointed by your decision, which would not appear to be in accordance with the wishes of the village.

It was agreed at the meeting that I would meet with your chairman as soon as possible with a view to attaining a better understanding of why this decision was made and potentially address all of your concerns. Without a viable plan for the future the Trustees have grave concerns about the future of a community building in our village.

Trustees of Shutford Village Hall, Charity No. 304364:-  
Roger Bancroft, Geraldine Bancroft, Christine Yarborough