

Our Village Hall

This New Year starts with a village-wide debate more important than we have had for many a year - should we build a new village hall. And, if we do, who will use it, who will pay for it and, crucially, is it fair to ask all households in the village to pay for it?

Since the hall is the only public asset and meeting place within our control (the pub and church, remember are owned by individuals or other groups) getting this issue resolved will certainly be a hotly-debated topic over the next few months. We are, therefore, devoting a significant amount of space of this New Year edition to report on the Parish Council meeting held last month in which the Village Hall Committee formally presented the rationale for a new hall to councillors. In the meantime, it's worth reminding ourselves of how Shutford could benefit from a new hall by restating the claims made for reconstruction by the VHC at a public meeting in November. They said the new building would:

- enhance the historic setting of the pub, church and manor house
- meet the needs of the village which were expressed in the village plan - 84 per cent of respondents to the questionnaire wanted the hall rebuilt or refurbished
- be used by far more people so hire fees will cover its annual running costs from year one
- become easily accessible to mothers and toddlers and the disabled - a vital plus in an age where the elderly are living longer and
- provide an environment which will be used in a whole range of new and different ways which villagers have been asking for.

Well, what do you think? Take a look at the next four pages to find out what was said at the meeting

Villagers to decide on new village hall funding

Shutford Parish Council has voted to put the future of our village hall in our own hands. The decision came after an hour-long presentation by the Village Hall Steering Committee and vigorous debate among the 35 plus villagers who attended the first Parish Council meeting of the New Year.

Councillors have agreed to ask households if they are prepared to fund part of the cost of a new village hall by increasing the amount paid on the parish council precept, which is paid as part of our annual council tax. If villagers want to go ahead with the new building plans the increase in precept is likely to be around £45 a year for a Band D property – only slightly more than the cost of a Mars bar a week.

The cost of a new hall is estimated at less than £300,000 and the Village Hall Committee has already received pledges for £100,000 and holds retained funds of around £25,000.

But with over 40 per cent of the money required already secured, the Parish Council were told that further fund raising is unlikely to boost this amount by more than between £25,000 and £40,000 due to the fact that alternative sources of funding for projects of this kind have been largely withdrawn by local councils.

Since the pledges, which have been secured for a new hall on the existing site, are dependent on the evidence of villager's support for the project, the Village Hall Committee had concluded that the only way to meet the villager's requests for a new or refurbished hall was by raising a Public Works Loan.

Loans of this type are already in widespread use to fund village hall construction throughout the county.

Why we need a new village hall

The Village Hall is run as a charity and the trust deed makes clear it must serve the entire community and be accessible to all.

With a growing elderly population who are all living longer and a large number of young parents with toddlers, easy and safe access is a major downside for the existing structure. Disability and pushchair access and disabled facilities cannot be economically provided and it has no safe drop off point for users.

Full refurbishment of the existing hall is uneconomic. The pledges are for a new hall only which means it would cost only a little more - about £30,000 - to rebuild it entirely, leaving the next generation with lower running costs and lower maintenance costs.

Usage of the current hall is falling and it no longer covers its running costs. The deficit is made up by fund raising while villagers hire other more modern halls for parties and family events. The current financial position of the hall is not sustainable. However, villagers are clear that usage would be high if the hall was modernised, thus confirming research that rebuilt halls generate a surplus and are vibrant and active from the day they re-open.

The cost of a new hall today - £300,000 - will rise rapidly due to high building cost inflation which is currently running at between five and seven percent. This means that a new hall will cost £400,000 in only five years - a £100,000 increase that is beyond any fundraising programme we could achieve.

If we don't do it now, when will we?

“It's only a matter of time before the issue being discussed is not one about rebuilding the hall, but the problem of not having one at all“.

With these words, spoken as the meeting came to a close and before councillors took their vote on next steps, one villager highlighted the reality of the present situation - doing nothing is not an option. A full structural survey of the hall in 2012 identified the need for major structural and cosmetic repairs in the short and medium term. Costings show that, without the pledged £100,000, the Village Hall Committee will have to spend over £40,000 on the asbestos roof alone. A full refurbishment would cost up to £170,000.

How do we raise this loan?

Any loan which leads to an increase in the village precept will be raised by the Parish Council only after consultation with villagers. The mechanism to be used for this consultation process is still to be established. It will be designed to establish the level of support for the loan and, as councillors made clear, to ensure all households are able to make their views known.

To keep any agreed increase as low as possible, the VHC has undertaken to continue aggressive fund raising and to involve the villagers in some of the finishing elements of the new build such as kitchen fitting and decoration.

Your investment for the future

Some villagers questioned the need for a rebuilt hall pointing out that since the existing one is not being used much, there will be no demand for a new one in the future. The difficulty some households may have in paying an increase in the precept was also to the fore of the minds of some speakers. These two issues were addressed by one resident who suggested that it might be helpful to take a more altruistic view of the need for a new hall and view it as an investment in the next generation. He said that “in the 60 years since the hall was put up the world has changed dramatically. We cannot possibly know what faces the people of Shutford in the next five or six decades but we do know that the world of work is changing rapidly. Technology is altering the prospects for jobs and incomes for everybody. The role of the community in facing this change will become more and more important,” he argued concluding by saying that the provision of a comfortable place where young and old can meet should, therefore, be seen as an investment in the future, not a cost on the present.

What next?

In due course all villagers will be asked for their views on the scheme. Please use the opportunity to say what you want. Villager feedback is essential. Look out for village notices, meetings and further updates.

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