

**MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**MINUTES OF THE EXTRAORDINARY ENVIRONMENT AND LEISURE  
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON  
TUESDAY 3 MARCH 2009**

**PRESENT:** Councillors Mrs Blackmore (Chairman), Butler, Chittenden, Daley, Field, Mrs Gooch, Hinder, Verrall and Yates.

**APOLOGIES:** There were no apologies.

**101. Web- Casting**

**Resolved:** That all items on the agenda be web-cast

**102. Notification of Substitute Members**

There were no substitute Members.

**103. Notification of Visiting Members**

It was noted that Councillors Marchant, Moriarty, F Wilson and J Wilson were attending as visiting Members and wished to speak on Agenda Item 7, 'Call In: Management of Lettable Community Halls'.

**104. Disclosures by Members and Officers**

There were none.

**105. Exempt Items**

**Resolved:** That all items on the agenda be taken in public as proposed.

**106. Call-In: Management of Lettable Community Halls**

The Chairman welcomed the public to the meeting and requested that the Committee Members, witnesses and officers introduce themselves.

The Chairman invited Councillors Fitzgerald and Batt to outline their reasons for calling in the decision of the Cabinet with regard to the Management of Lettable Community Halls. Councillors Batt and FitzGerald explained that:

- The Report failed to provide a sustainable method of reducing the community halls budget to achieve the saving of £22,000 identified in the budget strategy;
- It was their opinion that the Report did not consider the implications of the Quirk Review, "Making Assets Work";

- A review of Community Halls had taken place every year for the last three consecutive municipal years without the identified problems having been sufficiently addressed; They felt that insufficient information had been provided in the report for decision and that the information subsequently supplied was not accessible
- Councillor Fitzgerald's submission to the committee is attached at Appendix A

The Committee discussed the following topics:

- The closure of community halls. The Cabinet Member for Leisure and Culture, Councillor Moss clarified that the report of the Kent Messenger on 27 February 2009 was inaccurate and that there was no intention to close any community halls. All Cabinet Members were fully supportive of community halls and appreciated their social value.
- With regard to Community halls running at a loss, the Leader, Councillor Garland identified that Community halls cost the Council £97,000 per annum. £91,000 of this was for the upkeep of Senacre Hall, Fant Hall and Heather House.
- Difficulties faced by urban community halls. It was identified that unlike their rural counterparts, urban community halls often struggled to establish community hall management. A Councillor indicated that community halls in Parished areas were given the opportunity to apply for financial support from the Concurrent Functions Fund. Members suggested similar financial support be provided for urban community halls.
- Recent financial improvements. Councillor Garland informed the Committee that considerable improvements had been made within the last year to the financial circumstances of the four halls under review; Senacre Hall, Fant Hall, Beechwood Hall and Heather House. The progress of these halls would be monitored and considered further within the Draft Asset Management Strategy. The sustainability of Senacre Hall had been secured as a result of Kent County Council's intention to build a Skills Studio at the site. In regards to Beechwood Hall, money had been allocated for equipping the Hall which would be drawn down when the building shell was transferred from the developers to the Council and a lease signed by the community hall association. Money had also been set aside to help the hall in its setting-up costs in the first year of operation. A member highlighted that Fant Hall had recorded a rise in monthly income. The Committee agreed that Fant Hall and Heather House required further review.
- Assisting in the creation of management committees. The Committee, following discussions with the Cabinet Members and Officers identified that the Council should assist individual users of the hall to create management committees and facilitate a reduction in the running costs of the hall, particularly with regards to maintenance costs.
- Advice from Action with Communities in Rural Kent. Ms Jenny Bradbury, the community halls advisor from Action with

Communities in Rural Kent informed the Committee that she offered support to community halls to ensure their sustainability. She noted that there were 400 – 450 community halls within Kent and that very few of these ran at a loss. The Committee agreed that the Community Funding Officer, Mr Terry should liaise with Ms Bradbury to discuss best practice and methods to ensure the sustainability of the community halls.

- Lack of Communication. A number of Councillors raised concern that the provision of financial information was insufficient. Hall expenses, particularly maintenance of the halls had not been clarified. Members suggested that a lack of information was a common problem with regard to report writing and appropriate consultation should be carried out prior to a report being presented. The Committee agreed that future reports to Cabinet and Cabinet Members produced by Officers contain greater detail and more complete information to ensure there was informed decision making. Councillor Garland advised the Committee that the details of the proposed Skills Studio at Senacre Hall had not been publicised so as to ensure the possible contract was not compromised. It was agreed that the Committee receive quarterly financial updates on community halls that were running at a loss, including projected income and expenditure. The Committee felt that there had been insufficient consultation with Councillors concerning the mobilisation of local residents to support local halls. It was recommended that an in depth review of community halls be considered as a topic at the scrutiny work programming workshop for 2009/10.
- Public concern over the lack of communication. Mr Mansfield, a member of the Fant Hall management committee, stated that he had had difficulties in communicating successfully with the Council. He told the Committee he had emailed various Officers nine times and he had heard no response, for which the Chairman apologised profusely. He explained that local people had been deterred from booking Fant hall as a result of Cabinet's decision. The Committee agreed that greater liaison between Officers and hall committees was essential and that the appropriate officers should arrange to meet with the management committee of Fant Hall
- Charitable Status. The committee were informed by Mr Terry, that the acquisition of charitable status would increase funding opportunities for community halls. The Committee agreed that charitable status should therefore be pursued by those community halls which currently did not hold it, in order to achieve additional funding.

**Resolved: That**

- a) The Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee be provided with quarterly reports for Fant Hall, Senacre Hall, Heather House and Beechwood Hall including projected and current income and expenditure.

- b) Future reports to Cabinet and Cabinet Members produced by Officers contain greater detail and more complete information to ensure a comprehensive analysis and more informed decision making.
- c) The appropriate Officers arrange to meet with the management committee of Fant Hall and address how to improve communication and offer appropriate advice and support.
- d) The Community Funding Officer and Social Inclusion Manager consult with Jenny Bradbury from Action with Rural Communities in Kent to discuss alternative management arrangements and funding options.
- e) Charitable status be pursued for those community halls which currently do not hold it, in order to achieve additional funding.

**107. Duration of the Meeting**

6.35pm to 8.40pm.

**The Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Committee  
Call – In  
Management of Lettable Community Halls  
3rd March 2009 at Heather House**

The reasons for calling in the Management of Lettable Community Halls is because the decision fails to address the issue which was to save £22.000, it fails to provide for a sustainable solution and it fails to consider the voice of the users of the hall and the wider community. The report having discussed mothballing, site disposal, and other alternative uses leaves those associated with managing the halls in an impossible position and without any confidence or assurances from the council.

The report failed to show the financial arrangements for each hall or the recharges and building maintenance costs associated with each building.

Heather House: Failed to inform Members of the Quirk Review position and opportunities that are being taken forward. That letting had greatly increased since the bookings had been administered by the Park Wood Healthy Living Centre.

It should be noted that the Cabinet decision shows Heather House as costing £16.750 up from £6.500 last year and up to £29.250 in the reasons for decision.

Senacre Hall:

Failed to inform Members of the skill centre arrangements being discussed, financial implications and how the playgroup on its protected rent would be incorporated.

Failed to inform Members that the hall was Sports Council funded and did this limit its use.

It should be noted that the Cabinet decision shows closure as saving of £12.000 while the costs are down from £27.527 last year to £16.750 this year

Fant Hall:

Failed to identify the growth item cost of maintaining this hall during this year

Failed to show how monitoring its use would provide answers.

It should be noted that the Cabinet decision makes no provision to fund the further period of 12 months or how it costs £11.317 this year(Less than a full year) and how that estimated cost can be reduced to £8.400 this coming year.

Oakwood Hall (Beechwood):

The report failed to identify why the developers have not yet completed the transfer of the building. No progress for more than a year.

Failed to identify that Oakwood Hall has only about twelve parking spaces –

It confirms that management arrangement for the hall was in hand under a 'model trust deed' approach.

Your reasons for decision states

'It is considered that the only way this sum can be saved from these cost centres is through closure of one or more of these sites and the successful sale of the land'.

This is not how the Council agreed the future of Hilary Hall or Howard De Walden or indeed The Manor and not how they will treat the Switch Café.

It would be outrageous to close these halls situated as they are in some of the most deprived areas in our Borough. These areas need social amenity and opportunity that provides for family members and friends, young and old, to participate in activities hold gatherings meet with other parents and toddlers and feel part of their community.

They offer facilities that could service the needs of the NHS and PCT indeed the whole Health and ageing agenda. They also offer sport opportunities and meeting places for a whole range of holiday and leisure activities.

This council own a number of halls and pavilions each providing in different ways for its community some have been leased, some have been sold on providing they continue with their objectives, and some have been expected to provide income. What we need is a composite list and a proper review to first understand the issues and then provide a way forward for each individual property.

I am pleased to receive details of most of the councils halls that has been prepared for tonight meeting as a result of the call in and this makes my case for a review: for example, why should Filmer Hall be asked to pay £1.600 as rent and the Manor Youth Club (KCC RUN) only £75.00.

It is worth pointing out that we have some 40-50 Parish, Community, and Village Halls serving communities in both the urban and rural areas of Maidstone all with a variety of land ownership, the council, the parish council, the hall committee and most being run by a management committee under a trust deed that allows for both elected and nominated members of the community to serve on the committee. In some cases the Council nominate Trustees to add strength to the board.

Some of these halls do benefit from support from local members, parish councils, local board members, but they do also have the opportunity to apply for grants across a wide spectrum and indeed there user groups can also benefit from grant applications and this collective approach not only provides survival but also sustainability.

1. I am asking scrutiny to recommend that these community halls are retained while we proactively progress new management arrangements with the community.
- Under a trust deed that allows for both elected and nominated trustees

- Under a trust deed that allows for both elected and nominated trustees currently managed by a local community group.
- Transferred to a charity limited by guarantee with suitable aims and objectives.
- To include Council nominated Trustees if appropriate

The time scales will vary in the case of each individual hall.

2. To review all halls and pavilions whether managed or leased in the Council's portfolio and to regularise the conditions to, maintain, repair, decorate, insure, pay rates, maintain grounds and report back to members.
3. To agree an officer group with co-opted members including people currently managing successful community halls.

I have attached to these notes a copy of the access guide to parish halls as it identifies the range and variety of successfully managed halls in our Borough. This I see needs updating as it appears to leave out the very halls under discussion.

I also include a copy of the very latest figures on Heather House but please note the 2008-9 data does not include March income except for some advanced deposits.

I also include the early outline of a report to facilitate the transfer of Heather House from Maidstone Borough Council to Park Wood Plus.

I trust this has been helpful for members.

Cllr. Mike FitzGerald