

Recommendations for remodelling Community Halls in Maidstone Borough Council ownership

October 2012

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1. Purpose of the report

In late 2010, Maidstone Borough Council undertook an audit to assess community hall provision in the Maidstone borough. Based on the audit's findings, this report makes recommendations, where appropriate, to remodel the existing provision of community halls managed by the Borough Council based upon community need.

2. Halls in Council ownership

The Borough Council owns a number of community hall buildings, but currently only operates 2 halls in the borough, which are:

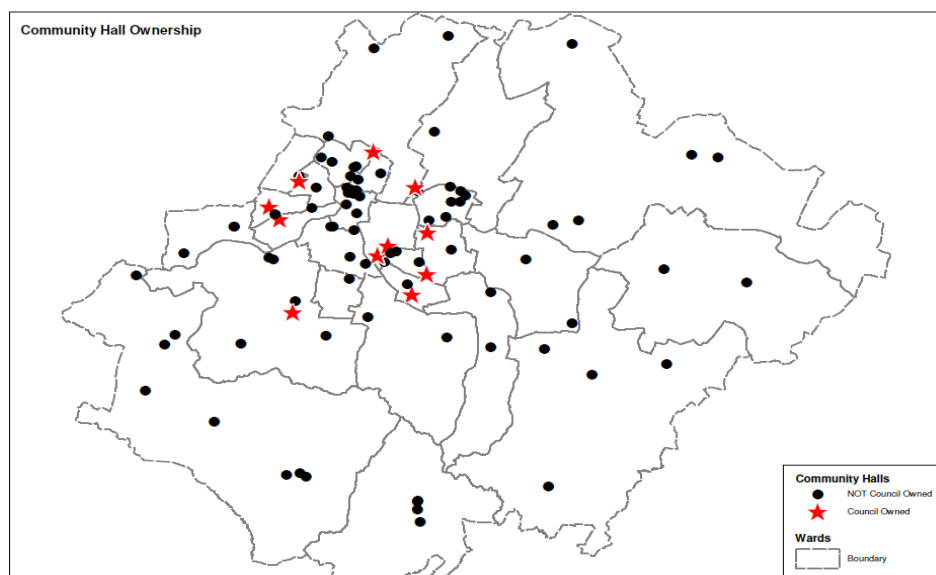
- Fant Hall
- Heather House

The Borough Council does not own any halls in the rural areas, which are generally operated through parish councils, trusts or privately. In relation to the other halls the Borough owns, but are currently leased to community organisations, these are set out below.

- Beechwood Hall
- Downswood Community Centre
- Dunk Memorial Hall
- Giddyhorn Lane Pavilion
- Grove Green Community Centre
- Penenden Heath Social Hall
- Shepway Youth and Community Centre
- Switch Youth Cafe

The majority of these halls are either leased in perpetuity or have long periods left in their respective leases, apart from Giddyhorn Lane, which has four years left. Council owned community halls are shown on map 1 below:

Map 1 – Community Hall ownership



3. Recommendations for remodelling halls in Council ownership

Asset transfer can help give local people and community groups greater control of their area and their community. However, the Borough Council would need to consider a community hall's perpetual use for the benefit of the community if it does follow the asset transfer route. Grassroots organisations can lack the resources to tackle the asset transfer process. Therefore it is essential to consider other transfer models, including long-term leases or peppercorn rent, which promote community empowerment for local organisations, but provide the Borough Council with the benefit of being able to monitor and ensure a community hall's ongoing usage for the community's benefit.

Long-term leases provide the Council with the opportunity to retain the financial asset of both property and land, whilst ensuring the community facility is utilised and maintained. The Council may then at a later date decide to either dispose of the asset or asset transfer. It is recommended that a long-term lease is offered at a minimum of 25 years, to ensure the leaseholder can apply for both capital and revenue external funding.

Fant Community Hall

Since February 2008, Fant Community Hall in Barming has been operated by the Fant Hall Trust, a registered charity, with no rental fee.

The hall is open 7 days per week and its primary function is the provision of a space for general community activities and private hires, including meetings, parties, mother and toddler groups, pre-school nursery and crèche, fitness classes, dance classes and NHS baby clinics. It also serves as a dedicated polling station.

The current lease arrangement requires Maidstone Borough Council to maintain, repair and insure the property. Maidstone Borough Council undertakes a Schedule of Condition of the property every five years. The hall was built in the early 1960's to serve the local community. The deeds state the property does not have to remain a community hall facility and can be used or developed for other purposes, However, the limited plot size significantly reduces its development potential and would not serve as an appropriate as a development site. The Trust has made a number of improvements to the property, including new flooring (which the Borough Council contributed 50% of the costs) and kitchen and toilet facilities. The accommodation is currently in a good standard of condition.

The Trust is responsible for the day to day operational management of the hall as a community facility, including bookings, payments, opening and closing and cleaning.

Recommendation: The trustees have expressed a wish to extend their lease arrangement on a long-term lease, which would then permit the Trust to apply for local and national funding streams to develop its existing community programme.

The majority of village halls in England have model trust deeds set out in standards documents produced by Action for Communities in Rural England (ACRE). The Model B1 lease which is proposed is a national model devised and recommended by ACRE in respect of village halls leased under a freehold. While the surrounding area of Fant Hall is not a village, it is considered that the hall will fulfil the same purpose within its local community and therefore the Model B1 lease will be the correct model to apply in this case.

Consistent with the Model B1 lease, in return for a peppercorn rent of £175 per annum and a 25 year lease, responsibility for repair and maintenance of the building, utility bills and relevant insurances would become the responsibility of the leases. Usage of the building would be as a "not for profit" community hall. The lease will need to ensure the Fant Hall Trust retains its charitable status for the duration of the lease. The lease must state that the hall is designated as being for

community purposes only. The Fant Hall Trust must use the property for the use and benefit of the community local to the property and not for any other purpose.

It is therefore recommended that the lease is extended from February 2012 for a further 25 years, with the Trust taking full responsibility for the property's utilities, maintenance, repairs and relevant insurance. Maidstone Borough Council will charge a peppercorn rent of £175 per annum to support the Schedule of Condition to be undertaken for the property every five years. The proposed lease agreement will reflect that Fant Hall will remain a designated polling station for the Borough Council.

Heather House

Heather House in Park Wood is currently operated by the Fusion Healthy Living Centre, a registered charity. Maidstone Borough Council currently receives 70% of Heather House's rental income.

The hall is open 7 days per week and used for a variety of regular community and private hires, including meetings, parties, mother and toddler groups, fitness classes, sports clubs and community groups.

The current lease arrangement requires Maidstone Borough Council to maintain, repair and insure the property and pay utilities. Maidstone Borough Council undertakes a Schedule of Condition of the property every five years. The hall was built in the early 1960's to serve the local community. The accommodation is currently in a fair standard of condition. However it should be noted that the existing roof contains asbestos, which is prone to leaks. To replace or over-roof the existing asbestos cement sheeting is expensive, around £75,000 and a specialist contractor would need to be appointed to oversee any work.

The Trust is responsible for the day to day operational management of the hall as a community facility, including bookings and payments. The Trust oversees the caretaker (employed by Maidstone Borough Council) responsible for opening and closing and cleaning.

Recommendation: Fusion has expressed a wish for a longer-term lease, which would then allow them to apply for capital and revenue funding through local and national funding streams.

Fusion's main funder is currently the Primary Care Trust, which due to the national changes to the health service, will cease to exist from April 2013. It is therefore currently unclear what arrangements Fusion HLC will have from April 2013, and as such careful consideration needs to be given to the long-term management of Heather House.

It is recommended that Fusion's lease is extended for one further year up to April 2013, whilst their funding arrangements are being finalized and future options can be discussed and agreed. Going forward, Heather House may benefit from the asset transfer route, with the lease being tendered through the Council's procurement process. The asset transfer route can then be explored as an option, as well as a long-term lease extension.

It needs to be noted that the current caretaker for Heather House is under the employment of Maidstone Borough Council. Under any new contract (e.g. long-term lease or asset transfer), the caretaker should become the responsibility of the lease holder or owner. The existing post holder will be eligible for redundancy from Maidstone Borough Council or could be TUPE'd over to the new management.

The table below details the maintenance costs associated with each hall between 1 April 2011 to 31 March 2012. It should be noted that whilst the planned maintenance costs are relatively low, the reactive maintenance is significantly higher in most cases.

Community Hall	Reactive Maintenance	Planned Maintenance	Fire Risk Assessment	Fire Extinguisher Servicing
Heather House	£15,086.16	£3,869.72	£150.00	£100.00
Fant Hall	£3,098.13	£2,260.00	£150.00	£50.00

Proposed works for 2012 to 2013, include approximately £44,000 for the external redecoration and the sealing of an asbestos cement sheet roof at Heather House and approximately £28,000 to replace the heating system and sealing the asbestos cement roof at Fant Hall.

Giddyhorn Lane Pavilion

Giddyhorn Lane Pavilion in Allington was leased to the trustees of Poplar Pre-School, a registered charity, in 2000 on a 15-year lease at an annual rental fee of £6,000, which is collected via the Borough Council's Property Services team.

The pre-school accepts children between the ages of 2½ and starting school into its two halls, running morning and afternoon sessions between Monday to Friday. The school offers an essential benefit to the local community being the only pre-school facility in the Poplar Grove area with places consistently oversubscribed. At its last OFSTED inspection it was graded outstanding in all areas.

The lease arrangement requires the tenant to maintain and repair the property, but there are no obligations to improve. Maidstone Borough Council undertakes a Schedule of Condition of the property every five years. The accommodation is currently in a good standard of condition.

The Poplar Pre-School Trust is responsible for the day to day operational management of the property as a community facility, including bookings, payments, opening and closing and cleaning. Maidstone Borough Council is responsible for the property's insurance.

Recommendation: The current lease expires in 2015. The trustees have expressed a wish to extend their current lease arrangement on a long-term lease. It is therefore recommended that the Poplar Pre-School is offered a 25 year lease, maintaining a fixed annual rental fee of £6,000.