

HADLOW DOWN COMMUNITY CENTRE

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT AGM MONDAY, 25TH FEBRUARY 2013

At last year's AGM we declared that within the calendar year, our business plan would be completed and also that we would be in a position to present to you a draft of a planning application to be submitted to Wealden District Council. It is with disappointment and frustration that I share with you than none of these has been achieved but, on behalf of fellow Committee members, I want it to be understood that such failure should not be construed as an example of 'yet another talk-shop' or a lack of commitment of all concerned. Understandably I suspect some of you may be asking why we didn't achieve what we set out to do and also some feeling that this is a project that quite simply is not going to happen.

Clearly the obstacle to progress that none of us anticipated back in February of last year was the revision of the Wealden District Council Local Plan otherwise known as the Core Strategy. Ordinarily, as an exercise in planning development strategy and policy, this should be relatively straightforward but the issue of Ashdown Forest and how Wealden District Council decided to address associated environmental and ecological concerns, resulted in measures that will have a profound effect on local housing, business and community development.

Apologies to those present who are aware of the detail to this but I feel that this needs to be explored further given the significant impact that this had on timescale for the project and its future direction. In effect, the council has imposed virtually a complete embargo on any development within those areas situated 7 km from the edge of the forest. We understand that the council has based its policy on two key factors :- i) the potential for increased visitor pressure on the Forest which may disturb the Nightjar, Woodlark and Dartford warbler (the bird assemblage for which it is classified as a Special Protection area) and the potential for increased atmospheric nitrogen to change the heathland habitat (for which it is designated a Special Area of Conservation). We have yet to see any evidence to support either of these contentions. So what does this all mean?

Basically we can have a new hall, built on the playing field site, with an opportunity to have larger areas for storage, toilets etc but not for the main hall – the assumption being that the larger the hall, the more users it might attract and that this would lead to increase in traffic and nitrogen deposition. In December 2012, together with members of the Parish Council, we met with Wealden Planning and Development Officers in order to gain a better understanding of the position and as recently as 18th February, Sandra Richards as Chair of the Parish Council and myself met with Councillor Roy Galley, WDC Planning and Development Portfolio Holder.

The truly negative implication of this policy is the restriction on disposal/sale of the existing village hall site for affordable housing and commercial development that would realise a capital receipt that could be used as 'seedcorn' funding for the new hall.

So why don't we revert to refurbishing and extending the existing hall as this would appear to be a cheaper and more realistic proposition? The answer to this is threefold:-

i) a recent and comprehensive Conditions Survey Report undertaken by the Design and Build Sub-Group (Richard Boswell, Paul James and Nigel Harrison) set out what improvement work would need

to be done and its cost. A conservative estimate puts this at between £150 - 250k and this does not include the costs of extension works and the purchasing of land to provide for additional car parking. The final cost could well approach £450-£500k.

ii) we would lose the opportunity to incorporate the current sports pavilion into the new build thereby replacing a tired and inadequate building.

iii) The parish survey conducted during Sept 2012 indicated clearly that the preferred site for a new hall is on the playing field and until we are told differently by a majority of the parishioners, we will continue to pursue this option.

In my report last year reference was made to the putting together of a Feasibility Report/Study and this included the conducting of a Natural Habitat and Geo/Tech Survey. The good news is that due to contributions from the Claude Jessett Trust Company, two anonymous individual donors and the pooling of resources by the Parish Council, the Playing Field Management Committee and ourselves, we have sufficient funds to have both surveys carried out. Although the playing field site is well known for its inadequate drainage and wet ground conditions, no one could have foreseen that the saturated ground would not allow vehicles and machinery onto the site to carry out the work. This was back in September of last year and there is no sign of when conditions will improve. As soon as conditions improve, the surveys will be completed.

Last year I explained why we needed to create a much tighter Committee structure so that future progress can be achieved with greater efficiency. The following are examples of what has been achieved as a result of this:

i) The Fund-Raising Sub-Group (Convenor – Vicky Richards)

For those of you who managed to attend the recent Bollywood Evening, this was a great example of raising the profile of what we are trying to achieve and of two organisations coming together to raise funds jointly i.e. HDCC and the Playing Field Management Committee.

ii) The Business Planning Sub-Group (Convenor – Fiona Schafer)

Based on the concept of Bronze, Silver and Gold (now Oak, Chestnut and Pine) the group attempted to match provision of facilities, footprint, activities etc to available funding by presenting three options.

The exercise began by visiting several recently built village halls in order to understand what could be built for what cost. Also an important outcome was being able to learn from the various projects about what they would have done differently. The village halls visited were High Hurstwood, Scaynes Hill, Barcombe, Punnetts Town and Fairlight.

The findings of this survey can be seen on the display boards – please feel free to approach any of our Committee members afterwards should you wish to discuss any thoughts/concerns prompted by what you see.

iii) The Build & Design Sub-Group (Convenor – Richard Boswell)

As referred to earlier this group has produced a comprehensive Condition Survey Report for the existing Village Hall. Its main purpose was to indicate what work needed to be carried out to the hall whilst we prepared for the provision of a new hall. Given that the current Village Hall Committee, the Playing Field Committee and Friends of St Marks are all in the business of fund raising, it is critical that no group loses out as a result of the fund raising activities of the others.

A copy of the report can be found on our website.

Being passed amongst is a petition for you to sign; based on informal but well-informed advice that we have received, a planning application submitted to Wealden DC with an accompanying petition, would be considered by elected members rather than officers. It is our belief that councillors would be more sympathetic to what we are trying to achieve. So please sign.

We have considered what we need to do to obtain signatures of other parishioners and it seems that we will have to undertake the same process as that of the survey i.e. door-to-door. If any of you would like to help with its circulation, please add your name to the list which also is being circulated.

Finally what are our ambitions/targets for this year?

At a Committee meeting held on 7th January 2013 it was agreed that a draft Business Plan and Planning Application would be produced by 30th June with the necessary surveys and reports being completed in the meantime. Fund raising will continue and once again I conclude by inviting any of you to volunteer to be part of this group. Several HDCC Committee members serve on other groups as well – I think that I can speak for other members when I say that we don't do this because we enjoy committee work!! We need more people to lighten the load – I can assure you that your help, knowledge and expertise will be greatly appreciated – please speak to anyone of us after the meeting should you wish to find out more.

On behalf of the Hadlow Down Community Centre Committee, I thank you.