

Great Easton & Tilty Parish Council meeting as sole trustee of the Great Easton Parish Hall Fund, registered charity number 295400, on 28 September 2023

Time: 7.00 p.m.

Minutes

Present: Committee members: Tristan Martens (chair and councillor), Marie Benterman (councillor), Julia England (councillor), David Hahn (councillor), Claire Hurst (councillor) and John Stevens (councillor). Kate Rixson (secretary, taking minutes)

1. Chair's introduction

Having been confirmed as chairman at the last meeting (as per agenda item 4 on the agenda), Tristan Martens opened the meeting and welcomed members of the committee.

2. Apologies for Absence

Received from David Lawson and Peter Neale. No interests were declared.

3. Minutes of previous meeting

The minutes dated 22 June 2023 had been circulated and were approved and signed.

4. Date for AGM

It was agreed to hold this in the function room at the Three Horseshoes pub in Duton Hill, on a date to be fixed in January 2024.

5. Report on action points from last meeting

5.1 A structural engineer's report had been obtained, saying that although the hall was generally in reasonable condition and structurally sound, the roof was at the end of its life and contained asbestos.

5.2 Peter Neale was thanked for having engaged a builder to prop up the twisted beam while the need for further repairs were investigated and costed. Quotes had been obtained and circulated for a patch of the damaged area of roof, and for replacement of the entire roof.

5.3 A new broom had been purchased.

6. Financial position and bookings

The committee referred to the financial position and bookings and noted that for several years the hall's income (from hirings) had not met its outgoings. Since 2019

it had been losing between £2,500 and £4,000 a year. This had been exacerbated by the Covid 19 pandemic when cleaning costs had escalated – it had been necessary to clean after each hire. Fuel charges had doubled since 2021 and regular maintenance and repairs were needed. Even though cleaning costs had reduced, outgoings were still twice as high as income.

The trustees were concerned that repairs were now needed to soffits, guttering and paintwork as well as the major repairs to the roof.

It was noted that some items which, in part, benefited the hall were being paid for by the parish council. This included the broadband connection, insurance and administrative work such as invoicing hirers and keeping the accounts. The parish council used the hall free of charge for meetings and to store records. It was noted that it was within the parish council's powers to support the hall financially and that councillors also supported the hall as volunteers at a practical level.

7. Current hire agreement and hire charges

Advice had been obtained from the Rural Community Council of Essex. It was noted that as a charity the trust must comply with its trust deed terms and treat all its beneficiaries fairly and equally (in this case, residents of the local parish area). It had to ensure the charity remained financially viable. Therefore allowing free use of the hall would be hard to justify as a long-term policy as costs were not being covered. Allowing some local residents and not others to use the hall free would be viewed as unfair to those residents not benefiting, therefore contrary to the terms of the trust. It might be reasonable to allow free use for a short initial period in order to kickstart a local initiative but the trust had been advised that other methods of supporting local groups should be found.

The secretary noted that the parish council had powers to give direct financial support to local groups.

It was noted that hall hire charges were currently waived for the Five Parishes toddler group, the Great Easton Community Association and The Eastons Women's Institute for bookings of less than 3 hours. This had been agreed as a way of supporting such groups after the social isolation of the pandemic, and to bring in new groups to the hall.

After discussion it was concluded unanimously that the current free use by these three groups alone could not be justified. The trust could not afford to allow free use by all local residents as this would jeopardise its long-term financial position. The trustees had a duty to ensure the hall charity was financially viable which meant that its costs should be covered, at least. It was noted that the parish council used the

hall for meetings and storage free of charge and there was a conflict of interest between the “council as trustee” and the council in this respect.

Decisions taken

7.1 No one could be allowed to use the hall free of charge unless a strong case could be made that this was fair to all residents – and then it should be on a temporary basis only. The parish council would be asked to consider supporting groups which would struggle to continue without free use.

7.2 Current charges should be increased after research into hire charges elsewhere.

7.3 By a majority vote it was agreed that new charges should be brought in from January 2024 after reasonable notice to those affected. An informal approach would be made first.

The contents of the hire agreement were not discussed due to lack of time and this would be deferred to a later meeting.

8. Inventory of items in hall loft

There was concern that storing the large amount of equipment presently in the loft was unsafe as the load-bearing capacity of the ceiling was not known. The roof was also not watertight so these items risked being affected by damp.

It was agreed to request a list of items stored in the loft by the parish council, the community association and any other group using it. Groups should be asked to remove heavy items as a matter of urgency.

9. Repairs

It was decided to obtain quotes for other exterior work (soffits, guttering etc as mentioned above) to enable the trustee committee to make decisions on the priorities, alongside the quotations for work on the roof.

10. Sign discouraging dog fouling

It was noted that there was a sign on the gate from the car park (parish council land) into the field. It was decided as a result that a sign on the side of the hall was not necessary.

11. Items 12 and 13 were deferred but it was agreed that a further meeting would be held by videoconferencing before the AGM, on a date to be fixed by the secretary.