

Great Easton & Tilty Parish Council meeting as sole trustee of the Great Easton Parish Hall Fund, registered charity number 295400, on 7 December 2023

On Teams videoconferencing

Time: 7.30 p.m.

Minutes

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

1. Chair's introduction

Tristan Martens opened the meeting and welcomed members of the committee.

2. Apologies for Absence and opportunity to declare interests

Claire Hurst had given apologies. No interests were declared.

3. Minutes of previous meeting

The minutes dated 28 September 2023 had been circulated and were approved and signed.

4. Report on bookings

4.1 The secretary reported that bookings were steady and the dance class had booked extra sessions. A morning session for puppy-training had been requested for at least one hour, possibly two. Occasional one-off hires continued and enquiries were regularly received. The hall had a permanent advertisement in the Five Parishes Magazine and contact details (checked this month) were available from a Google search.

4.2 Review of rates:

The secretary had circulated rates from 8 local halls for comparison although she acknowledged that halls varied widely in size and, to some extent, facilities. There were numerous halls available within ten miles and it was a competitive market.

The chair updated the trustees on the current cleaning arrangements. Cleaning had been a significant element of costs in 2020-2022. During Covid restrictions cleaning after every hire had been needed but now a professional clean took place once a week. On Fridays the parish council clerk visited the hall before the

regular dance-class/weekend bookings, to empty bins and clean if necessary. This was not charged to the Hall Fund account.

It was noted that fixed costs (e.g. standing charges for electricity and gas, sewerage and water) had all increased substantially (e.g. doubling since 2020) and an increase in charges was necessary as the hall was losing money and gradually using up its reserves.

Various rates and patterns of charging were discussed including variable rates for weekdays and weekends (as now), including Friday evenings in weekends, different rates for commercial and charitable organisations, adding the cleaning costs to the hire charge as a lump sum, and setting a minimum charge period such as two hours.

The trustees wished to keep the hall affordable and attractive to hirers so decided on a simple charging structure. The hourly charge would be £13 for Monday to Friday (daytime and evening) and £15 for Saturdays and Sundays, without a minimum hire period. The charge would apply from “key out” to “key back” i.e. from the time the hirer first accessed the hall until they left after their booking. The weekend rate would continue to be charged to the Essex County Council Adult Learning upholstery class after their current booking (to Easter 2024) expired.

It was agreed that the rate increase would take effect from 1 February 2024 with notice being given as soon as possible and during January 2024.

4.3 Review of hire agreement

The current hire agreement (which had been in use for several years) was reviewed and approved with an amendment to the request for deposit. It was agreed that a deposit was not usually necessary but that the trustees should reserve the right to charge a deposit which could be varied at their discretion. The secretary would circulate a revised agreement for approval at the next meeting.

5. Financial reports

Summary and detailed accounts had been circulated for 2022-23 which showed costs exceeding income by about £4,500 per year. The 2022-23 accounts would be presented at the AGM in January 2024.

Payments and receipts for the first eight months of 2023-24 had also been circulated. The deficit (reduction in reserves) since April was about £3,000 (i.e. in line with 2022-23).

Reserves (i.e. cash in the bank accounts and investments) remained healthy at over £44,000 including a long-term investment with CCLA.

The trustees agreed that the hall should be aiming to at least break even to ensure it would be there for many years to come. The chairman noted that although the building was over 100 years old and had been constructed as a temporary structure with a limited lifespan, it was in good condition for its age as confirmed by the recent structural survey. It had been well-maintained although had some issues such as the condition of the paintwork outside and a small area of damage to the roof. Further expenditure on repairs and maintenance would be needed soon.

To reduce costs it was agreed that if possible a “smart” thermostat should be installed enabling the heating to be turned on and off remotely with a smartphone app. Costs were estimated at around £400 including installation and this expenditure was approved.

It was reported that there were rumours and concern in the Great Easton community that the trustee committee intended to close or even demolish the hall. The chairman offered to speak directly to the Great Easton Community Association about this misunderstanding. There should be no doubt in anyone’s mind that the parish council as trustees were planning for its long-term survival as a hall. It was agreed that the trust would be as transparent as possible, within the constraints of the Charities Acts which imposed a duty of confidentiality. The parish council website should have a page devoted to the hall where information on the trustees’ plans for the hall could be provided, and the hall could be advertised as a venue.

6. Agenda for AGM

The draft agenda was approved and would be advertised/circulated. The AGM would be advertised in the parish magazine.

It was agreed to present the accounts for 2022-23 as a straightforward printed summary, with further details available on request.

7. Repairs to roof

It was noted that water was getting in at one place on the edge of the roof and there were cracks across the sheeting. Mr Neale advised that the builder who had put up the acrow prop was able to seal these hairline cracks and it was agreed that the chairman would speak to the builder and Mr Hahn and Ms England would ask about borrowing a cherry picker so sealant could be applied.

Large amounts of equipment and parish council papers were stored in the roof space which was unwise considering that the load-bearing capacity of the ceiling was not

known. It was agreed that the trustees should aim to clear the loft space during December if possible.

8. Any other business

Mr Stevens noted that Stansted Airport offered community funding for village halls and that other organisations such as the Round Table and Tesco tokens could be applied to. Obtaining sponsors for fundraising events such as quizzes might also be considered.

9. Next meeting

This would be fixed after the AGM, no later than March 2024.

There being no further business the meeting was closed at 8.30pm.

List of action points:

Secretary to revise hall agreement for approval, obtain quotes for installing a smart thermostat, inform hirers of increased rates and “key-out key-back” policy, publicise AGM, prepare accounts for AGM.

Mr Hahn to set up web page for Hall and with Ms England arrange cherry picker.

Chairman to speak to builder about repairs to cracks on roof and arrange removal of items from roof space.