

Hawstead Community Council

AGENDA

Monday 14 November 2022 6.30pm

Hawstead Village Hall

1. Welcome and apologies

Present: Susanne, John, Bob, Amanda, Louisa, Ali, Shannon, Sarah

Apologies: Caroline

2. Survey results – any comments/questions?

Susanne first summarised the additional information (attached) brought along for this meeting relating to costs and historic trends.

Initially we discussed the following items raised by the Consultation paperwork received to 31 October.

Should we buy extra seating in play area?

Decision: Yes, please can JS get a price for another picnic bench to match the current one and get it ordered for the spring.

Repair/replacement of play area equipment

Decision: We will plan for the bark to be dug out March/early April and replaced in time for the first wedding on 21 April. James Carr and Rupert Brown have offered their help. Once all bark is removed, we can look at the bases of the structures and paint on preservative as necessary. We need to think about materials and decide how much bark to order and from where.

Still to decide: We need to set up a ring-fenced fund for ongoing repair/replacement and commit to an agreed annual amount when finances allow.

Still to decide: Any extra play equipment to go in when bark is removed?

Additional storage (inside/outside)

SW expressed a need for more internal storage for cleaning equipment available for hirers. SW has a friendly joiner who she will get down to look at the area in front of the noticeboard ASAP.

Decision: SW will try to get the joiner to quote for something. We can also see whether we can locate something suitable that is self-standing.

Flooring

Decision: A surveyor will look early December at the state of repair of the main hall and corridor and give his considered opinion. We have located replacement planks in the loft and have checked for a colour match, so we could replace and repair potentially. SW has also asked the cleaner to meet her on site to discuss polishing the laminate floor and also better washing of the kitchen and toilet floors. SW will report back ASAP.

Still to decide: What to replace/repair and when.

Suggested new clubs

There were lots of suggestions from the Consultation for new clubs. After discussion, it was agreed that HCC volunteers cannot be expected to run new clubs but we can facilitate them meeting.

Decision: SW will write something in the VV to promote villagers coming together to start new ventures. We might also consider a Clubs morning where we offer a space for interested parties to come and chat. We can point people in the direction of funding too. We can also use the analyses of the forms to email groups of people who expressed an interest in setting up the club.

Extra whole-village social events?

Decision: We agreed that in 2023 we would offer the following:

- February/March curry night – SW to investigate
- Easter Children's party? – Sarah/SW
- Coronation Party – Ali/Amanda
- Plant Fair – Caroline
- Fete – Caroline
- Halloween Children's party – Sarah/SW
- Xmas lunch – Caroline
- Xmas drinks – All
- Christmas Children's party – Sarah/SW

Pantomime

At the meeting on 7 November, concern was expressed by Janet Watson and Geraldine West that the main point of the previous pantomime trips was to foster a sense of community, which meant everyone attending one performance as a group. We were told that some 40 or so residents used to make the trip and it cost HCC ~£400. It was noted that when Geraldine stepped away from organising the event we asked for another volunteer to take charge from the village. No one stepped forward. So the event was cancelled for a few years, and then reinstated in 2021. There was little interest in 2021 (three families?) and COVID also caused problems with performances cancelled. In 2022, still with no one prepared to run a more community-focused event, we decided to offer more flexibility to families so they could book their preferred performance. Those young families (currently two) who have used this opportunity are grateful for the financial assistance and would not have been able to attend the pantomime without support from HCC. However, the villagers present at the meeting on 7 November were not happy that village money was benefitting just a few families.

Decision: Ideally someone needs to step forward quickly to organise a group booking for the pantomime in 2023. SW will advertise for someone in February's VV. We will be

arranging a Christmas children's party (first one in 2022) which we might expect to attract 19 or so children plus adults (assuming similar interest to the Halloween party). So it may be that we drop the pantomime, especially if not many residents are interested. This needs to be decided early 2023.

Triple-20s lunch: should it remain restricted to those aged 60+?

Decision: The majority of residents wanted to leave things as they are. There will also be issues with space if we take many more villagers. So we agreed to leave this meal as it is for those aged 60+ plus younger guests who will need to pay for their meal.

Village Voice

Most villagers feel the VV is a good communicator and useful. However there was little support for paying for a printed version.

Decision: Leave the VV as an electronic copy BUT HCC needs to spend time trying to locate villagers who require a printed copy and then hand deliver or leave copies at the village hall for collection.

Warm space

There were 10 residents who supported a warm space plus others who said they would help on occasion.

Decision: While we expect this not to be supported, SW will contact Lesley Carey and Rosemary Harrison to see whether they are prepared to coordinate it and see how it goes.

Hearing loop

We definitely have a hearing loop in the hall and it is switched on but no one knows how to use it!

Decision: SW will contact the sound system guy who installed it and see whether he can offer advice about use or whether there is a more up to date version.

Expression of interest in HCC

A few people expressed interest in learning more about HCC.

Decision: SW will get together a list of such people and make contact ASAP.

Play area

There was support for a slide and zip wire, amongst other things.

Decision: When the time comes to replace the climbing frame, HCC can look at a play complex including a slide, fireman's pole and so on. We may add additional if there is space in Spring when we are replacing the bark... to be decided nearer the time.

3. Accessibility: Resident bookings

The attached documentation clearly shows that we have very few resident bookings annually and that numbers do not appear to have been impacted by more summer weddings at the hall in 2022. This is not unusual according to ACRE's The English Village and

Community Hall Survey 2020, and is a feature of a village with an older/ageing population profile.

Since 2018 (when we have records), Hawstead residents tend to book the hall in the autumn months, which are readily available for hire at that time of year.

In addition, expecting resident hires at £15 per hour to finance the £9,500 shortfall in funds if we stopped non-resident hires is unreasonable. In total, resident hires bring in only £300-£600 annually. It is not financially viable to stop all weddings and non-resident bookings and expect the hall to be financially viable. Financially viability is a large part of our responsibility to the village and to the Charities Commission.

Suggestions at the previous meeting that we should try to find more commercial weekday bookings have been tried 2-3 years ago with no success. Further work on that would be very time consuming and is not something the existing volunteers can take on. If we employed someone to run the hall, that could be part of their remit, but obviously there would be extra costs involved in their wage.

It is clear that data show there is little use made by residents of the village hall for private hire, regardless of how much the hall is hired to non-residents in the summer months.

Decision: With 80% of our consultation respondents being happy with current hire rates, we agreed they remain as present, which means there has been no price rise since 2013.

SW commented that the only difficulty with resident bookings is that they do tend to query the cleaning payment, and extra work is required to justify that payment.

It was claimed at the meeting on 7 November that residents respect the hall more and keep noise levels lower out of respect for neighbours. There is no evidence to support this assertion. The only significant damage to the hall building in recent years was caused by a resident decorating the hall without complying with our requirements. The only time in 2022 SW has been called down to the hall due to excessive noise was due to a residents booking.

At the meeting on 7 November there was a demand for resident bookings to be given priority. We can only give resident bookings priority if we have two bookings that overlap in front of us at the same time. In that instance, resident bookings are given priority.

Decision: To make things clearer for residents, we will create a document detailing the elements of resident bookings: security deposits, cleaning fees, self-management, wakes, book special events early. We will also urge/remind residents to book well in advance for any important anniversary parties, etc., they might be planning.

NB Resident bookings are not a no-cost event. They still require management by volunteers: what equipment is needed? key exchange; booking cleaners; putting equipment away; bond management.

4. Managing bookings

It is important that any booking policy recognises the time required for a volunteer to manage the booking. If we employ someone part time to manage this task, we would require an additional ~£6000 annually to cover their costs.

Note in particular that in 2018 the volunteer had to manage 43 individual bookings (two of which were weddings) and finances showed ~£2,000 loss. In 2022 the volunteer had to manage 27 individual bookings (13 of which were weddings) and finances showed ~£4,700 profit. Clearly the current position is more manageable for the volunteer and is better financially.

Value for volunteer time

From a financial analysis, it is clear that profit from one wedding weekend equates to 7-8 individual long (over 6 hours) private bookings at £48 per hour. Refusing one wedding means we need to work 7-8 times harder to bring in the same amount of profit, as well as expose the hall to 6-7 times the amount of wear and tear, and potentially 6-7 times more late-night noise for neighbours.

Decision: It is clear that wedding bookings are an important revenue stream that works better with volunteers than multiple individual smaller bookings. This approach also limits the number of events and so the number of occasions residents might be disturbed by letting activity. We must continue to accept weddings to ensure viability of the village hall, as demonstrated by the change in financial fortunes between 2018 and 2021/2. This approach also minimises the total number of events, as well as wear and tear on the hall building itself.

Use an online booking system

It has been suggested that we use an online booking system to lessen the pressure on volunteers. SW and Sarah B both agreed that it would not work. We need to be able to assess on a booking by booking basis whether other bookings would be impacted by the new booking. Is there sufficient time for cleaning, etc? Do we have manpower to manage the booking?

Fixed viewing days

It was also suggested that we offer fixed days for viewings. Again, it was felt this would not work. Many couples looking for weddings have to try to coordinate viewings with friends/parents, etc., and given we are asking for a large sum from them, we ought to show flexibility. In addition, defining in advance a day for viewings would effectively block a day from hire.

Security bond

We need to put ourselves in a stronger position in relation to withholding the security bond. We need to be very clear with hirers about the circumstances that will lead to bond withhold and how much will be withheld.

We did make the point to the attending residents on 7 November that we would much rather be in a situation where residents were not disturbed by a hall hire than having to withhold a bond because of a breach of terms. In the latter instance, residents will have been disturbed/upset and, even if we withheld £200, how would that ever make good a disturbed night for a neighbour?

Decision: The hirer needs to understand better the circumstances upon which we will withhold bonds. However, we need to make very clear that we do not want disturbance in the first place. We need to create a document for signing by the hirer outlining the many circumstances that will result in part or full bond withhold. Ali and Susanne will look at this.

5. Too many weddings

The few concerns raised at the meeting on 7 November very much focused on objecting to weddings at the village hall. These concerns targeted:

- availability of the hall to residents
- noise leaking into neighbouring properties
- rubbish on the village green
- feeling intimidated by hirers using the village green and play area.

Availability

From an analysis of historic bookings, we have concluded that a perceived lack of hall availability to residents is not supported by the evidence. However we will make sure residents understand the need to book important event dates at the hall well in advance (ideally 18 months to 2 years).

At the meeting a resident asked why a wedding hire included Friday evenings since it meant the village could not use the hall on a Friday evening. HCC feels that a couple using the hall for a Saturday wedding would not have time to set up and decorate the hall on a Saturday morning. Indeed, all couples using the hall spend several hours on a Friday evening setting up, bringing in food, etc. Couples using our hall do not have the finances for a venue that can offer full set up and supply staff, etc. It is very much a DIY wedding venue. Thus our wedding weekend package must include a Friday evening.

It should be noted that HCC has staged two or three Friday evening events over summer 2022 (alongside fish and chips) offering a free drink but less than a handful of people attended (and usually only the volunteer's family and friends!).

Noise

Noise becomes a real problem in particular when doors (especially the front door) and windows are left open and the hirer uses a commercial disco or live band. This is more a summer problem than a winter one.

It is unfair to expect hirers to instinctively understand what is too loud, so we need to be able to give them a visual indication. We also need to be able to track noise levels through time so we can have 'proof' of breaching noise limits should we need to withhold a bond.

Decision: SW has already spoken with a sound engineer and we are looking at noise limiting options in the main hall (ideally a system that can be turned on for noisy hires only). Once a design has been agreed, we will take the final costs to the main Committee for a vote.

Decision: We are also going to toughen up our terms and conditions of hire, and put together a document that will need to be signed in advance by the hirer highlighting the most important behavioural aspects of hall hire. This will need to be read and signed before the key is handed over. SW and Ali B will create the initial document for consideration.

Decision: We are asking for quotes for the front door to have an auto-close hinge fitted so that it closes without assistance. We can also add a notice to the door to keep it closed at all times (except for loading/unloading).

Decision: Our wedding event caretaker needs to be accessible to resident neighbours of the hall in case there is concern about behaviour. We would rather the caretaker deal with any problem, not a resident.

To be decided: We also need to consider raising the level of the security bond/deposit for wedding hires and late-night parties.

We also discussed the end time for music at night. At present, the hall/car park must be silent by midnight, so music should be stopping 11-11.15pm at the latest to enable discos to pack up and guests to leave. This needs emphasising and checking by the caretaker (using the hall cameras). This is more easily done if we can remotely access a noise monitor. SW will talk to the sound engineer.

The issue of fireworks and sparklers was also raised, with one resident reportedly fearful of fireworks setting light to their thatched roof. This is already part of our terms and conditions of hire. Unless we have a member of HCC on site for the whole event, we cannot guarantee that fireworks are not set off.

Decision: We will add fireworks to our checklist on handover and make it clear that a hirer is fully responsible for the actions of their guests. If fireworks are set off or sparklers are used, the whole bond is forfeit immediately.

Rubbish

There was one concern raised about the amount of rubbish on the village green/play area after some events. Our feeling is that generally all hirers clean up well after their events. Weddings are given until midday the following day to clean up everything, so complaints about rubbish before midday are unfair on the hirer. However, hirers should be leaving the outside area clear of hazards at midnight given that the grass and play area are public areas.

We pay a caretaker to check the site after weddings to ensure it is clean and safe. This takes place some time after midday.

Decision: In amending our terms and conditions of hire, we will request biodegradable confetti only, with no plastic/metallic table glitter sprinkles, no confetti balloons, and so on. We will also emphasise that hirers are responsible for their guests, so they need to ensure no one brings anything that breaks our rules of hire.

Decision: We will also request that crockery and glassware should not be taken outside. If anything breaks outside, it should be cleared up fully and immediately.

Decision: We need to consider providing more cleaning equipment for hirers to be kept in an accessible storage area. SW will ask a joiner to quote for something to be built near the noticeboard.

Feeling intimidated

At the meeting on 7 November, one person said they had felt intimidated by hirers when the play area and green are used for wedding events. These areas are public areas and open to all, even the hirers. For weddings, this use occurs for only a few hours on one day during the hall hire period. HCC felt that the village green has plenty of space for residents to take a walk and avoid the hall if they are concerned. Note that no one mentioned this as an issue when commenting on the play area in our consultation.

6. Financial position

The attached document shows financial changes through time. It is clear that, not including COVID grants and after rebalancing prepayment deposits, at the end of April 2022 we made ~£4,700 profit. This has enabled us to consider whether we charge a hire fee for community village events.

Decision: It was agreed that with immediate effect we would offer the bowls club free weekly main hall hire for Tuesday evenings. This club is open to all residents and is mainly comprised of residents. These are both important factors in agreeing this decision. It should be noted that we cannot bind future Community Councils to this decision, so it will be reviewed annually in May as the new Community Council meets, pending finances for the previous year, future spending plans, the popularity and make up of the club and the will of the then Community Council members.

Decision: JS was asked to talk direct with Judy Carter of the HATS group about its community remit. HCC was unsure whether it was a closed group or in fact open to all villagers, the latter of which HCC could consider offering free hall hire. JS will report back.

Decision: SW will contact Phil Baker of the parish council to see whether they are able to accept free hall hire for their meetings. If it is possible, then we will agree to not charge them for their meetings, with the same review process as for the bowls club, i.e. not binding future Community Council to this decision.

Pricing of weddings

The attached document shows how wedding prices have increased at the hall through time.

We do not feel it is responsible to agree to the suggested new wedding prices (double or triple current prices which would take us to £3,000 or £4,500 respectively) since they were not based on any analysis of the current rates from other venues. CM spent quite some time 2 years ago analysing prices from many venues and reporting back, which underpinned the current pricing.

Ali B will talk to her sister in law who plans weddings in Kent about hall hire prices for weddings. Louisa J will also make contact again with her 'friendly' local wedding organiser (even if it means paying her) and see whether we can get a more formal analysis of a likely pricing that is both fair and unlikely to result in no wedding bookings for 2024. We do not want to price ourselves out of the market since weddings are a big part of making the village hall financially viable and manageable by volunteers.

The villagers present at the meeting on 7 November did feel that with such a large amount of cash in the bank we can look to cut back weddings at the hall and risk village money while we look to see over the next few years how many are required for financial viability. We prefer to base any decision on meaningful research and data.

Decision: Reconvene with the above information and take a decision on pricing for 2024.

7. Booking policy for 2023/24 – to be reviewed annually in May by each new Community Council Committee

First, we remain uncertain whether the popularity of HVH in 2022 and 2023 is a post-COVID anomaly or a longer term trend. Any decisions need to be taken based on the new pricing suggested (whatever that is). We also need to remember that any arguments about wedding noise and rubbish actually apply equally to any evening party event. So our policy should perhaps rather be looking at monitoring late night party bookings, not narrowing the focus on weddings in particular.

HCC members need to think about the following and have any questions/alternative ideas ready for the next meeting. These are not final decisions but rather our initial thoughts.

How many weddings and distribution through the year?

An initial proposal was a maximum of 10 wedding weekends May–September, with no more than two per month, with some flexibility on timing depending on enquiries. Ideally we will try not to book them on successive weekends. Non-wedding non-resident bookings will be accepted only 8 months in advance, giving weddings time to book up to the maximum limit and thus secure our finances.

When a month with four weekends has two late night hire events (wedding or party), no more will be accepted unless it is a late resident's enquiry.

For October–April, no more than two late night weekend events per month will be accepted unless it is a late resident's enquiry. A late night event can include a wedding weekend, although weddings are much less likely given the parking issues over winter.

How many other party events?

See above. Note that we will accept party bookings from non-residents no more than 8 months in advance. This is to enable summer weekends to remain open for residents and the more lucrative wedding bookings when possible.

Should we raise the financial 'security bond'?

This bond is currently £200. Should we raise it to £300/£350 for future new bookings? To be discussed further.

What about daytime party events?

We can take daytime events although at present we are limiting such events to a 6+ hour minimum hire period.

Do we set a financial limit for the year and once we reach that point stop all bookings for the remainder of the year (except residents)?

For discussion.

Summer 2024 village events

SW stated we should lead by example and book in village social events for spring/summer 2024 now.

When we find that residents are STILL not booking when we leave weekends available, what then? Why are we leaving weekends free? If it is to minimise noise issues rather than improve accessibility for villagers, then we don't need to review this annually unless finances require us to do so.

Decision: Reconvene having considered the above to take final decisions.

8. AOB

SW has found a Natwest bank account that could be an improvement on the current HSBC account. SW has asked John West to double check the information to make sure he agrees it is worth pursuing.

9. Date of next meeting - 6.30pm 9 January 2023