

Report from the Buckden Village Hall Trust

1. Summary of the year

Buckden Village Hall continues to be a major part of village, hosting a wide range of clubs, activities and business meetings. Our core regular hirers, most of whom have been with us for many years, underpins our income base. Weddings and special occasion parties as a small but vital part of our offer, and children's parties are mainly a loss leader servicing Buckden residents.

The Hall accommodated several large business conferences over the year, much of which was repeat business from public bodies in Cambridge, Northampton, Bedford and surrounding areas. We also attracted a small, but significant number of new customers. Reviews on Google and customer feedback consistently highlight the Hall's cleanliness, high quality facilities and professional management.

The Hall temporarily closed on 23 March 2020, following Government restrictions on movement and public assembly. This was a major blow to our hirers and the Village Club, all of whom are small businesses relying on access to the Hall. The staff are currently on furlough, supported by the Government's financial support schemes. We are beginning to plan a gradual return to work, tentatively in late July/early August as Government restrictions ease, with all the necessary safeguards in place.

We did continue to support the NHS by hosting the regular blood bank clinic during the lockdown. At this time of writing, the pre-school is also beginning to run a limited service.

2. Relations with the Parish Council and Village residents

In cooperation with the Parish Council, we have set up a quarterly meeting to explore areas of mutual interest which has established a positive forum for discussion. Plans for upgrading and expanding play equipment for young teenagers, building a joint storage unit, vandalism and maintenance cost of maintaining the grounds were all issues explored. We also contributed to the neighbourhood plan. Discussions around a joint storage facility were put on hold due to financing constraints.

The Trustees have discussed hosting a few events annually for village residents, but there was little response from residents. Perhaps residents prefer choosing their own involvement with the Hall on their own terms. The conference on climate change, for example, was exceptionally well attended.

3. Financial summary

Financial performance of the Hall was good over the year, with several new clients who brought in one-off large contracts. The lockdown period began near the end of our financial year, so most of the effect of the lockdown will be in the 2020/21 financial year. The good performance over the year has helped us rebuild our reserves which will provide a cushion against the economic uncertainty over the coming year and allow on-going capital expenditure.

We have successfully applied for the Government funding to help businesses affected by the Coronavirus, including staff furloughing and business interruption funding for those forced to close by the lockdown restrictions. With the Hall temporarily closed, we have been able to make substantial savings to our normal running costs.

Our largest expenditure continues to be our staff of three (manager, cleaner, handy man). Our philosophy is to offer a living wage rather than the minimum, with annual inflationary pay rises, plus mandatory pension provision and National Insurance contributions which continue to rise. Our staff are major contributors to the Hall's success, and we believe it fair that we continue to recognise their contribution.

Utilities, as expected, are the second largest expense, and we have conducted a review of energy usage and renegotiated our contracts resulting in over 10% savings p.a. We have also moved to limit the usage of the pavilion and its electricity by outside sports users, as this is the largest user of electricity.

This year we have had to hire a private security firm to provide secure lock-up services for evening and weekend events after our informal arrangement with the Village Club proved unsustainable. This is an extra £4,500 cost p.a. which we are trying to recoup through increased rent and hire charges.

The Hall is now over 20 years old and needs increasing levels of maintenance and longer-term capital expenditure. We have taken advantage of the Hall's temporary closure to replace the wooden floor in the main hall which was at the end of its life. This will cost approximately £30,000 but will last for another 20 years.

The Hall's maintenance equipment for the playing fields are currently housed in a makeshift container which provides no protection for our mower which is also at the end of its life. These two items alone will cost circa £85,000. The drainage of the playing fields is an on-going problem, given our Cambridgeshire clay, which has led to many match cancellations during the exceptionally rainy winter and spring. The fields may also be draining into the Valley and contributing to the death of the lake. This will also need urgent action in the next year or so.

We have successfully applied to the Football Association for funding for some of these items and have paid for the FA to improve drainage in the short term. Full funding details are still being negotiated with the FA, but we are fairly confident of obtaining partial funding to renovate the Pavilion, build a storage unit and replace the mower. We will need to fund-raise for additional monies to match the FA's contribution, as well as contributing from our reserves.

Several of our tenants and clubs have requested financial support over the year, due to a combination of declining membership, mismanagement and unwillingness to fund-raise or research financial support from sports associations. Although the Trustees have tried to support these organisations, they do represent a very small constituency of the Hall. It is also not in our constitution that support for selected groups over other groups and committing our financial resources. This is an issue with which we will need to grapple in the near future.

4. Future plans

We hope to begin a phased opening of the Hall in late July, Government regulations permitting. Once the Hall is once again running smoothly, the Trustees will need to address a number of outstanding issues:

- BVHT has requested a new scheme from the Charities Commission as leases granted by previous Trustees are in breach of our constitution. This has been in progress for some time but will hopefully be resolved this year when BVHT will also begin conversion to a Charitable Incorporated Organisation.
- Accreditation to Hallmark II has been stalled during the lockdown but needs to resume to assist in fund-raising.
- The Board of Trustees continues to shrink and is currently unsatisfactory in terms of managing the long-term interests of the Trust. We desperately need new trustees who can also help us realise our future objectives and who do not represent a narrow range of interests. The Chair and Treasurer are both stepping down in October 2020.
- The Hall and its estate are virtually at end of life. We will increasingly need to invest in larger scale improvements to replace carpets, floors, curtains, furniture, etc.
- The Valley is rapidly silting over and will be a dead bog in less than 5 years. The whole area needs to be renovated with some urgency if we are to maintain this nature area for residents. This needs to be jointly undertaken with the Parish Council, but little progress has been made on this project.
- Village residents regularly complain in feedback surveys that the playground provision is inadequate and that there is nothing at all catering for teenagers or children over 8 years. This is again a large scale, long term investment that will require cooperation with the Parish Council and fund-raising.
- Several of our clubs, including the pre-school, continue to teeter on the brink of insolvency. The BVHT cannot continue to subsidise organisations that only benefit the very specialised interests of 20-30 people. This does not benefit the Residents of Buckden as set out in our governing document. If these clubs do not have village support, they should not continue. This needs to be addressed.