

Whitchurch-on-Thames Village Plan

Village Hall Study Group Report

Members: Stephen Trinder (Chair), Matilda Oppenheimer, Lindsay Freeman, Graham Morfey

Procedure: Study Group meetings including site visits with SODC planning and other officers, Little Milton village hall and informal discussions with land owners.

1 Background

The Whitchurch Village Hall is over sixty years old and was originally built as a recreation building for Canadian servicemen stationed in Whitchurch during the war. It has many drawbacks and is expensive to maintain. Over 50% of those questioned in the village supported building a new Hall, either on the existing site (24%) or on another site (27%) compared with 32% favouring major refurbishment of the existing one.

The Village Plan survey indicated a demand for a greater sense of community in a modern society and more activities in support of this. It may be argued therefore that this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to provide high quality facilities that will meet those needs in Whitchurch.

2 Existing Building

The existing Whitchurch Village Hall is unsatisfactory in many respects, notably

- need of serious repairs – roof leakages, heating systems, electrics, flooring, kitchen/toilets/other services, guestimated at costing up to £100 000
- its substandard condition results in low value hiring and very little daytime use
- maintenance costs are disproportionately high
- almost a complete lack of parking
- incapable of satisfying demand for a range of activities.

Even with remedial work it would still suffer from inherent limitations – a long narrow site with no scope for long-term development, with too small an internal area, inadequate toilet facilities, negligible parking and no disability provision.

3 Options

Given the unsatisfactory state of the hall in its present condition, there are three principal options to address this situation:

- 3.1 Major refurbishment of the existing hall
- 3.2 Demolish the existing hall and build a new one on the same site
- 3.3 Build a new hall on another site, disposing of the existing one.

3.1 Major refurbishment

The works outlined under para 2 would only correct the present deficiencies. For a significant overall upgrading of the facilities, there would need to be further major expenditure on insulation, retractable/sound proof screen, modern sanitary ware, light fittings, kitchen equipment/accessories, flooring materials, curtains/blinds, tables, chairs and back stage facilities in all probably amounting to at least a similar sum again. As 2 above, the inherent restrictions of the site would still remain.

3.2 Re-build on existing site

While the Planning Authorities might have difficulty in resisting such a proposition, parking would continue to be a problem. This course would involve the not insignificant costs of demolition, moving the electricity station to gain more floor space, new foundations for the larger footprint and taking account of the roots of nearby mature trees.

The new building would be constrained by its narrowness, possibly requiring another (more expensive) floor level to achieve the desired internal spaces. These factors also significantly reduce the opportunity to use an economical, prefabricated, modular construction.

By virtue of its location, such an option precludes the hall from being a catalyst for wider sports and recreational activities in the village or complementing the functions of the primary or pre-schools. For the reasons above, it is almost certain that construction on the existing site would necessarily be more costly than a comparable floor area on a new site, which is considered in the next paragraph

3.3 Build a new hall on another site

The availability of suitable land for such a structure is clearly a prerequisite to this option. Land of this kind is extremely limited in Whitchurch, leaving aside the planning considerations. A preliminary consultation on the planning criteria to be applied to any new site has been held with the SODC's Planning Department.

4 New Building

Initial studies of halls for comparable villages suggest the need for an overall floor area of approximately 400 sq m, to include:

- ✓ main hall
- ✓ committee room
- ✓ bar facility
- ✓ kitchen
- ✓ toilets
- ✓ storage/service areas.

Parking to approved standards would be additional to this.

Being in a conservation area, the building would naturally have to be sympathetic in style, materials and scale. A number of designs of this kind are available and would be the subject of early discussions with the SODC planning authorities.

A visit was made to Little Milton, a village of 500, 6m South of Oxford, which built a new hall of 300 sq m in 2005 at a cost in today's prices of £ 450 000. It is an extremely attractive modern design of Scandinavian wooden construction and is considered a fair model for Whitchurch, preferably with a little higher square meterage. Located on a 4-acre site with sports facilities, its high standard has successfully generated a wide variety of village activities and non-residential functions, resulting in a promising return and fostering a core of volunteers for its operation. Pine Log was the manufacturer but there are other suppliers of similar buildings, details of which are available separately. A **short report** of the visit is provided separately, together with a **fact sheet** on the Little Milton Hall.

5 Financial Considerations

These divide basically into:

5.1 Capital Costs

5.2 Operational Income/Costs

5.1 Capital Costs

It is not possible to indicate any firm figures as so many of the capital costs are unknown at this stage. However a minimum budget of £ 500 000 must be allowed for an appropriate building on to which must be added the cost of the site, services and fittings – probably amounting to not less than £ 250 000. Some grants should be available but by far the major part would in reality have to be raised by private subscription, which has not yet been tested.

Initial enquiries suggest that up to £ 200 000 might be available as a grant from SODC. Landfill Tax companies can offer significant grants (£ 44 000 to Little Milton for example) while some assistance might be anticipated from Defra. Further research might also uncover specialist charitable trusts in this field. Loans might be available from the usual sources (or individuals).

5.2 Operational Income/Costs

These are very difficult to predict. The accounts of the present hall are no guide as the rates are extremely low, given the poor product and low usage accordingly. The Plan survey suggested that there would be considerable support for a range of new community activities – film club, dance classes, quiz nights etc. It is proposed to undertake very modest upgrading of the present hall so that the demand for these can be realistically assessed before embarking on a new building.

The lessons of Little Milton were interesting. By aiming for the highest standard of building that could be afforded, their new hall has attracted considerable business from a large catchment, in preference to the generally poorer quality of surrounding village halls. By skewing their rates greatly in favour of local users, 25% from the non-residential usage provides 75% of sales income. This means that local people have 75% of hall time at less than half the non-residential charge. Their accounts have just been obtained and will be analysed for factual evidence.

As part of an initial feasibility study, a comprehensive Business Plan of the projected operational income and expenses would need to be prepared to ensure a viable hall once constructed.

6 Summary of Recommendations

- 6.1 Whitchurch Parish Council should appoint a sub-committee (a) to manage the hall's affairs (b) to supervise the simple short-term refurbishment of the existing hall and (c) to assess the case for building a new hall
- 6.2 The present hall should be given minor upgrading in the form of redecoration, new vinyl floor and curtains/blinds up to a maximum cost of £ 7 000. In this way the potential for a series of new village activities can be more accurately measured.
- 6.3 With the benefit of SODC's initial comments, enquiries should be made about the availability of the identified sites and an indication of their likely cost
- 6.4 Further study of suitable buildings for the purpose and the obtaining of reliable budget costs on both the existing site and on a new one.
- 6.5 Detailed enquiries about the availability of funding from the different sources.
- 6.6 Conduct a feasibility study of the projected operation of a new building, based on the experience of comparable other successful halls.

If approved by the Parish Council, there is no reason why these recommendations should not be put in hand immediately, notably items 6.1 and 6.2.

SWT/VHR2
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