

From Ian McFeat - 10 February 2024 (in black) **Parish Council Responses in red** To our Parish Councillors.

I have previously raised my concerns over the viability of employing a live-in caretaker to manage the village hall lettings. My concerns continue to grow with the now increased monthly pay the caretaker receives, which will be nearly £10k in wages alone plus the provision of a rent free flat which at market rental value is worth approximately £9k per year. This combined remuneration is I feel excessive when considering the revenue earned from lettings (approx £10k per year), and the actual work carried out by the caretaker. Based on a the minimum wage it equates to the caretaker working over 35 hours per week which clearly is not the case.

**The Caretaker's hours are being kept under review and this will continue. At present the average hours worked are at least 20 hours per week. The rate of pay was set at the same rate as his predecessor at so much per hour plus an overall reimbursement of the council tax – with the idea that this should result in pay close to, but not less than the national minimum wage (NMW) which for a 20 hour week would be £208.60 in 2023/24 and £228.80 in 2024/25. His current weekly pay is £185 which includes the council tax contribution.**

**However, the caretaker does have the benefit of live-in accommodation – but unfortunately the NMW credit for this is only £64 a week in 2023/24 and £70 in 2024/25. This brings his overall 'wage' to £249 in 2023/24 and £255 in 2024/25. So our initial estimate has proved slightly high based on 20 hours – but if a more detailed analysis were to show 22 or even 24 hours a week on average then we would only just be meeting our NMW requirements.**

Looking at the present financial year it is projected that the hall will be let up to a maximum of 300 times (individual bookings) over the whole year which results in a caretaker cost per booking of approximately £63.33 (£10k + £9k Divided by 300 ). This cost is, I feel, excessive and does not represent value for money for residents, with ever increasing operating losses that are now getting out of control.

By estimating ongoing cost of:-  
Insurance. £2.5k  
Wages. £10k  
Electricity/water/sewage £3.5k  
Maintenance £8k  
Performing rights internet etc £1k

This gives a total operating cost of approx £25k p.a resulting in a net operating loss of approximately £15k per year which equates to nearly half of the annual precept received.

Clearly the village hall charges are already too high, so no further price increase should be considered. **(This point is being debated by the PC and in order to give it and the point made below full consideration, any decision on revised prices has been deferred until the Autumn)** The obvious and simplistic solution is to employ a caretaker that does not live in. By letting the flat, income could pay for a caretaker reducing the net annual operating cost by over £9k. Yes the village precept would still have to subsidise the village hall by a lesser degree but opportunities to let the hall to locals at reduced rates and local organisations for free would encourage greater use, creating a village hub for events and meet ups.

**The costs of running the hall have only one variable in this calculation – the caretaker's salary. So based on the figures above the loss is £5k before any caretaking costs.**

However we might be able to get some letting income. If we were able to do this for a full year then we might receive £7.2k net (£9k less 20% tax). So at this point we would have a surplus of £2.2k before caretaking costs.

The question then arises as to how much a live-out caretaker would cost us – and whether indeed we could find someone with the range of skills the current caretaker has who would be prepared to work the antisocial hours that are typically required. Having a skilled live-in caretaker removes this problem. As it appears unlikely that anyone in Abbots Leigh would be interested in a job close to the minimum wage with random and antisocial hours we would also be faced with travel time and expense costs. A reasonable estimate might be 20 hours a week plus 3 hours travel time at say £13 an hour for 2024/25 – plus say £10 a week travel costs this equates to £309 a week or £16,068 a year.

Taking this alongside the surplus of £2.2k gives an overall deficit of £13.8k – just £1.2k smaller than the current arrangements.

While all of the above figures are estimates and might be open to question they are not unreasonable and the Parish Council does not think this amount of £4 per household per year merits a change in the current arrangements – however everything will be kept under annual review and in particular if the current caretaker moved to another post

The Parish Council has consulted with other PC's with village halls, and while none are particularly similar to Abbots Leigh it is noticeable that for a Village Hall to operate at break even, it is necessary to either have very modern easy to clean and maintain facilities – or to have appreciable buy-in from the community to open up, lock up and, potentially, clean and maintain.

I also feel the rarely let John Butler room should become a village office that the Parish clerk could work from 1 day per week. This village office could provide internet access and a contact point for villagers who want assistance with IT (especially the elderly) printing documents and co-ordinating other village groups activities and social events.

The Parish Council has considered this point and while on the surface it looks very attractive and appropriate it gives significant concerns about security and protection – especially for a female working there alone and for this reason the PC feels unable to support the idea.

I hope that our new Parish councillors will look at the facts and figures and consider the opportunities of managing our Village asset differently to benefit all who live and support its operation with our local tax.

All of the above has been discussed, debated and agreed by the current Parish Council prior to the meeting on 11 March.

Yes it may be radical but the village hall cannot continue to be an ever increasing liability, and requires imagination, foresight and initiative to continue to be a valued village asset, rather than an ever increasing liability.

Finally please can the Parish Council upload the monthly receipts and payments onto the website, with September being the last shown it is difficult to follow the financial status. Historically, the Parish council has breached its 'Standing Orders' and 'Financial Regulations', with the flat refurbishment, and an undertaking was given that all expenditure would be reported monthly on the web site.

Please get back to me if you require further information or clarification and hope my suggestions will result in a change or at least a discussion.

Kind regards

Ian McFeat