

Feasibility options for Sampford Brett Village Hall

1. Introduction and background (ToR)

The Acorn group was created as a response to an open public meeting in 2016 where the village discussed the future the Village Hall. Terms of reference were established and approved by VHMC and gave a direction for this group's work. The group consists of:

Clive Brooks, Diane Holman , Charles Cadby, Martine Woods, Hilary Weldon, Cameron Weldon, Brenda Payne, Andy Busby, Jane Busby, Margie Smith and Dave Smith.

2. Methodology

The group established contact with the Community Council for Somerset (CCS), a not-for-profit organisation with which the VHMC has an annual support agreement. A number of meetings took place, primarily focussed on:

- designing surveys for community engagement to determine individual and hirer-group perspectives, needs and desires for a village hall
- engaging professional engineers to conduct a physical survey of the village hall fabric and condition
- identifying funding sources for this initial phase of the project

We agreed with CCS that they would design, analyse and report on two surveys - one for each household in the community, and one for every past and present group which hires the hall. They provided a quotation for two discrete surveys.

We obtained quotations from three Structural Engineers who specialise in these types of physical site surveys, and selected the one which provided the best value for money.

CCS advised us that we were likely to be successful in a bid to the Big Lottery Fund to cover all the costs of the three surveys above. We applied in April 2016 and were awarded a sum of £6226 which covered the three quotations.

A technical survey was conducted in August 2017 and the results provided in September 2017.

Community surveys were sent out in November 2017; these were returned by each household either online or via post. The survey closed on 17th November 2017. A £50.00 'lucky dip' prize as an incentive to return the survey was donated by SBAG (Sampford Brett Activities Group) and presented to the winner, who very generously donated it back to SBAG funds!

The community surveys were confidential and results anonymised. A report was received back from CCS on 20th January 2018, which combined both survey results in one document. Technical and community surveys are available on the village website at www.sampfordbrett.org.uk/acorn-group

Informal approaches were made to a number of other villages to determine how they had tackled their village hall futures.

The Acorn group studied the reports and discussed them at a number of meetings, and have used this as the basis for describing key issues and requirements to be addressed, and a course of further action.

Progress has been narrower and slower than anticipated but commensurate with the resources available; frustrated primarily by group members' availability and time, and response times from 3rd parties. This is an augur of sorts for the next stages of the project.

3. Findings from the surveys

Technical Survey - key points emerging:

- We are confident from the Survey that the hall has at least a 10-15 years life expectancy
- Pedestrian access is poor
- Disability Discrimination ACT (DDA) compliance is poor but the extent to which this poses a problem under the status quo is not yet known
- External maintenance is poor in some areas, although some of this has recently been addressed such as clearing pathways etc. Some of the panel joint external sealant shows signs of breaking down and may be a problem sooner rather than later.
- The roof appears in good condition!
- Any meaningful refurbishment or rebuild will require a demolition/asbestos survey at an appropriate time
- We need to create an Asbestos register - but we need to determine if this has to be a professional activity (costly) or if we can do it ourselves
- Digital survey of the drains / toilets has been suggested, but at this stage we are not in a hurry to do this until we know the preferred option and plans
- The South Side of the hall is now better maintained which addresses one of the Surveyor's concerns regarding external deterioration and internal light values. The South side ownership/ Rights of Way issue needs addressing, possibly as part of the Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) project
- Ventilation is poor and causing ongoing problems with condensation throughout
- Mechanical / electrical services reviews have been suggested, but at this stage we are not in a hurry to do this until we know the preferred option and plans
- We agreed we should get some hall measurements as we are not sure of its area; this is an input to any replacement exercise
- Technically there are options to refurbish
- However, the Surveyor suggests that a refurbishment is just as expensive as a new build

Community Survey - main points emerging:

- We are confident from the Survey that the hall would be missed by the Community - it must continue in some form
- Individuals and Groups all comment on the less than satisfactory state of the main facilities - the kitchen, the main hall, access and toilets
- Specifically, improvements to
 - heating
 - lighting
 - Acoustics
 - Storage
 - PA systems
 - Disabled toilet facilities (DDA compliance)
 - Flexible areas/screens
 - Projector / IT
 - Hearing Loop
 - Car Parking
 - WiFi - not a headline from the survey but an integral part of any progressive improvements to the internal infrastructure?
- We seem to be providing value for money as regards our letting charges
- We seem to offer a good range of popular activities but clearly the Community would like more to be provided, although this to a large extent must be reflected back on the Community to organise and procure
- However, we can use Marketing and advertising strategies to engage people in pursuit of wider events/activities
- It does not appear that people are excluded from using the hall for any reason other than personal taste and preferences

The Acorn Group can report that the hall is held in high regard by the community and groups that use it, and is a valuable community asset that must continue to provide existing and new services and facilities within the village.

In outline, the Acorn Group conclude that a village hall for the future must have a combination of these broad characteristics to make the hall a more attractive place for social and business/hiring activities - in no particular order

- Appropriate pedestrian access
- Improved and DDA compliant pedestrian access
- Improved and DDA compliant kitchen and toilet facilities
- Internally and Externally sound and easy/economic to maintain
- Proof against all elements and external forces - weather, vandalism or other criminal activity
- Use modern and maintained mechanical / electrical services that reflect current and potential uses
- Established on a legal basis that properly describes the Title, location and any rights held by it or over it
- Properly ventilated and heated using modern materials and components to increase efficiency and effect
- Good acoustics
- Adequate storage for groups artefacts
- A dedicated and serviceable Bar area
- Some capability to segment the hall for smaller meetings
- Where practical, using eco-friendly and sustainable materials
- Expanded to better use the existing site footprint
- Able to accommodate a range of users with varying degrees of space, technology and services requirements eg WiFi, overhead projection, PA system, whiteboard
- Able to accommodate 65 seated people
- Meet all relevant Health and Safety requirements
- Provide good parking on site or nearby
- Have access to an outside area such as the existing car park for outdoor events
- Have access to a sound and secure storage facility on the car park
- Be managed using a structure that improves on the current model while reducing any personal liability of the management group; most likely a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO)

4. Options considered

A. Do nothing and let the future community inherit the problem

This would be a betrayal of the evident community support solicited but worth reminding ourselves that this is de facto the approved approach if *we cannot get agreement and subsequent resources for a way forward*

B. Do nothing interim but start planning to rebuild

Any project to rebuild the village hall will take significant resources including time; given some of the issues raised by the surveys, doing nothing in the interim would seem a recipe for further structural decline and erosion of user enjoyment, potentially over a number of years

C. Refurbish the hall in one way or another

The construction of the hall and the materials used are such that just about any intrusion into its fabric will require caution and be costly. A number of the key characteristics for a future hall above will be impossible or not cost-effective in this option. Our technical surveyor suggested that refurbishment costs would be similar to those for a new build. This does not seem to provide value for money.

D. Identify some short-term 'wins' from the issues above and create a short/medium term programme to deliver those, while at the same time start detailed planning to rebuild

Realistically, rebuilding the village hall is seen as a long-term project; even if it started at the beginning of 2019, it might be a considerable amount of time before we deliver a new facility, if at all. This option mandates the detailed investigation of a rebuild, which will need project managing through a number of reviews ("gateways") to ensure we understand, among other things, the resource implications and can authorise the project to continue on its plan. These reviews will be progressively informed of all costs and anticipated funding sources, and at any point the project may have to end or re-group. In project terms, this is not failure but control.

Meantime, the effects of Option B above would start to accrue. To avoid this, while the new hall is planned, other managed projects should be undertaken to address agreed issues that might be resolved to a degree of satisfaction and cost effectiveness in order to sustain the hall and make it more attractive and equitable for all users. The ability to salvage any or all of the current hall assets will also need to be determined.

5. Proposed option

The Acorn Group proposes that **option D** above is approved by the VHMC and that work commences immediately, in a timescale to be agreed and commensurate with resources.

6. Resource implications

• Finance

At this stage we have not investigated the costs involved in rebuilding the hall but it is understood that this will be in the region of £300,000. Clearly this is beyond the budget of the VHMC and any support that SBAG could provide. An early deliverable of the project would be to profile likely costs and contingencies, and to investigate possible funding sources such as local, regional and national awards, donations, wills, SBAG activities, loans etc.

As well as the capital costs of a rebuild, the project will also need to be aware of ongoing maintenance and perhaps development costs of the hall.

The Acorn group has spoken to other village groups who have been successful in securing *unmatched-funded* Lottery Grants of £400,000. We have direct experience of securing much smaller-scale funding for specific project deliverables such as the recent surveys. It is entirely feasible to make progressive grant applications as part of a bootstrapping process. Financing the project will be challenging; a somewhat speculative process in its early stages where we need to be aware of the risks associated with successive investments? Early on, we will need to decide the stages at which we can make accurate cost forecasts, as these will almost certainly be required if we seek external funds through bids. We will also need to determine the balance of VHMC funds to be used against applying for grants. Option D also mandates addressing some shorter terms shortcomings of the hall which will also need financing. A balance between these projects and the rebuild project will have to be achieved.

• Project People

As daunting as the financial implications of this project may be, they are matched by the implications of having quality and *continuity* of input from a project group. Looking forward to when hopefully a build is able to commence, it is likely that as part of the contract we will have a dedicated project manager to ensure the build progresses to time, quality and budget. Dare we say delivering the building is the easy part; getting ourselves to the point

where we ensure we build the right thing with the right contractors at the right time for sustainable costs is going to be the difficult part; and the part that will largely fall to the local project group that we create.

For the project to be successful, we will need to recruit and retain (as far as possible) a project team that

- Has a single project manager to orchestrate the activities of the group. The first action of the project manager will be to lead the project team on a breakdown of the project from end-to-end to identify risks, deliverables, dependencies and outline timescale.
- Has project leads for key strands of work at appropriate junctures. These strands will be agreed early on and are likely to include:
 - Hall Requirements/specifications
 - Legal issues
 - Communication/publicity/liaison
 - Funding and finance
 - Decommissioning, Business as usual/interim arrangements
 - Secretary, project admin
 - Hall management, creation of CIO and future business model
 - Construction
 - Audit

Note that these are project *leads* - ideally different people - and not implicit 'doers'. The role is about firstly getting agreed definitions, costs, quality and timescales for any work that needs doing, and then monitoring and reporting progress and completion back to the project team. The project lead may well do some or all of the work, depending on available resources. As part of the community survey, we solicited interest from people who were prepared to be involved in the project as it progressed. **Excluding** the current Acorn group people who expressed a willingness to be involved, this is the breakdown:

Word of mouth communication	11
Help with fund-raising	13
Organising Community Events	3
Publicity	1
Marketting	1
Electronic promotion	1
Door to door distribution	14
Help with Finance	0
Grants	1
Running regular activities	1
Help with refurbishment	4
Building maintenance	0
Join committee/meetings	2
Sharing ideas	3
Acorn group	1

Various skills such as IT and decorating/DIY were offered in support of some of the above. Twenty one households stated that they would like to be kept in touch with the project, and these were emailed/sent a letter in May 2018 updating them with progress. They will be contacted again in the near future. It should be noted that there is a predominance of help offered around 'hands on/fund-raising/doing' type activities rather than project and planning type work.

- Skills, technical or other inputs

At points during the project we are certain to want to procure the services of professionals; for example legal, planners, architects, asbestos surveys. These inputs will need identifying as part of the initial project plan and funding identified and secured.

We may also want or need to get the input from other parties, for example other villages where groups have undertaken similar exercises. Getting that input in a quick and effective way will be important to avoid a general woolly discussion. We can certainly learn from other groups but their experience is not a substitute for us completely understanding our own imperatives.

We should also explore the potential for any form of partnership at any stage to increase effectiveness and reduce costs?

- Time

The technical survey suggests that the hall has at least a 10-15 years life expectancy, so this gives us a broad timescale during which we operate. However, as time progresses the condition of the hall is likely to deteriorate with an associated increase in overheads and service problems, so our approach should be one of prudent speed, determined by available resources. On current understandings, a good timescale would be 3 - 5 years.

7. Summary

Option D represents the best outcome for the Community of Sampford Brett.

If successful, we will ultimately have a modern and sustainable village hall that can accommodate a variety of functions and activities that are inclusive across the whole community. In the interim, the option also allows for a prudent spend on measures to improve the hall for what might be a period of some years.

The project is not to be undertaken lightly; it will require lots of commitment, energy and finance and once the first flush of enthusiasm wanes, then the real work will begin.

Perhaps a number of our aspirations will have to be foregone or adjusted for a variety of reasons, but a fundamental commitment to **a project team which works to a plan and structure is not negotiable.**

8. Initial Stage Plan and recommendations for next actions

Approval to proceed from VHMC
Liaise with CCS and share approach
Communications within community; determine available skills and experiences
Assemble project team and assign roles
Brainstorm project deliverables and define to an appropriate level for this stage

Produce outline plan

This initial work to include an assessment of what information about the deliverables we can determine with no cost; eg at what level can we liaise with architects and get an idea of where and what their costs will be? How much will a competitive element of such a service cost eg a costed one-off exercise to get accurate costings from multiple suppliers. What if any villager or other 'networks' can we exploit to our advantage?

The Acorn Group
August 2018