

REPORT TO PICKMERE PARISH COUNCIL

7th September 2021

AGENDA ITEM 9.1 COUNCIL PROPERTY STRATEGY

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Unlike many other parish councils, the Parish Council owns a range of property assets, as follows:

- The Village Hall and car park.
- The so-called IROS (Informal recreational open space), which includes the main field and land running down to the lake, including a separate piece of land adjoining the lake on its northern side, and also:
- The Turton Pavilion.
- The two plots of land at Park Lane/Clover Drive and Park Lane/Mere Lane.
- Clover Drive play area.
- The footpath link from Buttercup Way through to Mere Lane.

1.2 These landholdings all incur the need for regular maintenance expenditure. These costs form a substantial element in determining the Council's annual precept, which accounts for an annual household bill of about £36 for a Band D property in the parish. (The other significant cost element included in the annual budget is the cost of paying and supporting the Clerk, who is currently paid to work 1 day per week.)

1.3 Such an annual cost per household is extremely good value taking into consideration the qualitative benefits to the parish community of the property that is maintained by the Council.

1.4 It is appropriate from time to time to reconsider the Council's overall strategy for the property assets it holds, and this is the reason for the presentation of this report to Council.

2. CURRENT STRATEGY

2.1 In recent years, three particular elements of the Council's property assets have been the subject of strategic consideration:

CLOVER DRIVE PLAY AREA

2.2 On 1st December 2020, Council considered the future of the Clover Drive play area. It was clear at that point that the area – in particular the equipment and furniture – had reached the age that its refurbishment or renewal required serious consideration. The most recent independent survey of the equipment, carried out during summer 2021, found that whilst there were one or two aspects of the equipment that could be rectified, there were no serious or urgent problems that required remedy.

2.3 In considering this question, Council, quite correctly and responsibly, took into account various potential broad options, including removing the play equipment permanently, or relocating the play area to another part of the Council's land ownership, thereby permitting the existing play area site to be disposed of for development, thus providing financial assets to enable a new play area to be created.

2.4 However, Council decided at that point that:

- *... a scheme of substantial renovation and/or replacement of equipment (including benches etc) at the play area should be pursued further;*
- *...a working group of members [should] seek potential financial contributions to add to the Council's available funding for such work, and establish a specification for renovation or replacement of equipment, for approval by Council.*

2.5 The process of defining an appropriate specification for a refurbished or renewed play area is now actively ongoing. Any conclusion that is reached in this regard will have to be considered in the light of the financial resources that are likely to be available to fund such works.

VILLAGE HALL

2.6 The future of the Village Hall has been a live issue with the Council for more than 10 years. The matter was the subject of discussion at almost every Council meeting from 2010 through to 2012 and beyond, with various resident consultation exercises being carried out during that period, unfortunately ultimately providing an unclear statement of the community's attitude to such a possibility, though a small vocal opposition group of residents formed. The reasoning for the proposition to dispose of the existing Village Hall site and to replace it with a new larger hall on part of the IROS emanated from the preparation of the village's Parish Plan, as mentioned in the preamble to the small questionnaire of 2010 appended to this report.

2.8 Council is conscious of the age and local historical merits of the building, but at the same time, the structure is inherently not particularly well built, suffering from a number of physical shortcomings, and is also not a particularly attractive building for letting purposes. As a result, at the time of the first Covid lockdown, the building was hired out, in an average week, for only approximately 9.5 hours out of the 91 hours it was potentially available for letting. Its principal attraction to hirers, it is considered, is its low rental cost compared to other local venues – the hire fee has remained at £6 per hour for the last 10 years or so.

2.7 In the last full financial year of operation (2018-19), the Hall brought in £2316 in hire fees, but cost £3086 to maintain (including £465 spent on repairs). In 2019-20 Hall rentals amounted to £2859 and expenditure on the Hall totalled £4459, this latter figure including £2211 expenditure on repairs and enhancement. (It may be remarked that any allegation that the condition of the Hall has been neglected in recent years is therefore patently invalid.)

2.9 In February 2018 an outline planning application was submitted for the erection of a new village hall, with a small car park, on land at the IROS. This was subsequently refused on 15th August 2018. A copy of your Clerk's report on this decision is appended to this report.

2.10 As a result of that decision, Council resolved as follows:

...that the Clerk should seek at least 2 quotes for appropriate survey and building estimate work in relation to the works required to renovate both the VH and the Pavilion to maximise their potential for community development...

2.11 The subsequent survey report found that to renovate and improve both the Pavilion and the Village Hall such that they better meet the reasonable aspirations of your Council – i.e. to provide attractive, economic and usable spaces for the local community – might cost in the order of £200,000. Without substantial expenditure of this scale, the buildings would remain sub-optimal in respect of their appearance and function.

2.12 Following receipt and consideration of the survey of the two buildings (a copy of which is on the Council's website), Council reconsidered the matter on 4th June 2019 as follows:

8. Review of assets - the way forward – the Chair requested members' comments on the way forward, particularly in the light of:

- *the Council's previous decisions as to the options in relation to the future of its property assets.*
- *the planning decision of 2018 and its implications.*
- *and the subsequent commissioning by the Council of physical survey and analysis reports in relation to the potential and costs of renovating the Village Hall and the Pavilion.*

A discussion followed in which the following points were made:

- *The survey reports showed the very substantial amount of work required to bring up either, or both, buildings to a condition fit for purpose and for future years. Anecdotally, comments have been received from Hall users about its poor environment and unattractiveness for use. There seemed no prospect whatsoever of the PC being able to raise the level of funds necessary to achieve these objectives, nor was there any potential source of grant aid that was likely to make significant contributions to such levels of cost.*
- *In considering issues of location, it is clear that the two foci of community activity in the parish are the Red Lion PH and the IROS; that is the reason these sites were chosen for the location of the Parish's two defibrillators. The Village Hall is at the least on the periphery of the village, and indeed almost out of it, and this factor needs to be recognised in deciding how to take forward the future of the Council's built assets.*
- *In considering the future of the Council's buildings it is essential in these times to consider issues relating to the world climate emergency, and the carbon*

footprint of the Council's activities. These factors should play a role in any decisions made.

- *After several years of discussion and consideration of options it is essential that the Council decides upon a course of action.*
- *It is emphasised that in considering the options in the past and now, the Council is seeking to ensure the maintenance and enhancement of village resources and not the creation of any form of commercial enterprise.*

The Chair proposed in the light of the discussion and the need to proceed to a decision:

- *That the survey reports referred to above should now be placed in the public arena by way of the Council's website.*
- *Based on information now received and considered, the Council should develop a project to deliver an affordable, eco-friendly, fit for purpose Village Hall on land at the IROS. This project should:*
 - *incorporate a design and location that is sensitive to its surroundings, achieving minimum impact on the open space.*
 - *as closely as possible meet the requirements of Cheshire East Planning and National Planning Guidance.*
 - *incorporate public information events which will include discussion of location, finishes and the sustainable technology to be employed.*

This proposition was ... approved by 4 votes for, with 1 abstention.

2.13 This is where the Council's consideration of this particular matter rests.

THE TURTON PAVILION

2.14 The Pavilion was donated to the Parish Council in connection with the erection of houses on Jacob's Way, and the Council's control over its form and content was therefore limited.

2.15 The nature and condition of the Pavilion were considered in the physical survey of 2019. However the basic characteristics of the building are that:

- It is a relatively modern building and its physical condition is consequently reasonable.
- However its layout is not conducive to significant use by the local community – it is unheated, its meeting room is small as is its kitchen, whereas a significant proportion of its floorspace is taken up by circulation space and generously proportioned toilet provision.

3. OTHER BACKGROUND

3.1 Since 2019, two further factors have emerged:

- The establishment of local social media networks with the formation of the so-called Pickmere Residents' Group Facebook page, which can apparently be accessed only by invitation, and the establishment of the Pickmere Residents' Association. Both lobby groups appear to take exception to any idea of relocating the Village Hall to the IROS, despite its potential merits.
- The receipt of some unexpected windfall monies during the financial year 2020-21 – partly through the Community Infrastructure Levy (i.e. enforced donations to the Parish Council from developers of residential developments in the Parish) and through several Covid relief grants made by Government to the owners of business-rated properties.

3.2 Such monies totalled £41793. Of this total, £8514 has been expended on the new streetlight, signboards and noticeboards at the IROS and Park Lane, the installation of new external doors to the Pavilion, and the refurbishment of the lakeside footpath. £6000 of the remainder has been earmarked to help support the preparation of the Neighbourhood Plan, currently in process. There are also one or two smaller ongoing items of expenditure which may have to be funded from these resources. However notionally approximately £27500 of those windfall sums remains for potential use.

3.3 A report will be presented to Council at its October meeting presenting the half-year expenditure figures of the Council against its budget for the year, and itemising expenditure to date and the remaining funds held. However it is evident that the funds held by the Council, significant though they seem, do not approach the level of funds capable of achieving the kinds of improvement of the Village Hall and Pavilion previously considered desirable, and achievable through the redevelopment project. This comment is particularly valid since it is becoming apparent that the Clover Drive play area refurbishment project might well result in the wish for substantial expenditure, but in a current climate where potential sources of grant aid toward such a project are increasingly difficult to find.

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1 In the light of the above information, and the need for Council to make decisions in the near future on the potential earmarking of expenditure of that part of the windfall receipts which remain, it would appear that several broad options as to the long-term future of the two buildings currently exist:

1. To continue the strategy previously adopted by Council, i.e. to develop a project to deliver an affordable, eco-friendly, fit for purpose Village Hall on land at the IROS, primarily funded by disposal of the Village Hall site.
2. To abandon that strategy and revert to the previous policy of maintaining both Council buildings in their current form.
3. To adopt a more positive stance of seeking some enhancement of the Hall and Pavilion concomitant with the scale of funds available.

- 4.2 In the case of Option 3, it would be desirable at this stage to identify initial thoughts as to the kind of enhancement that might be feasible rather than simply adopting a somewhat vague policy without any idea of what might be a practical proposition in all the circumstances. In addition, if this option is to be pursued, it is recommended that a sub-group of members take on responsibility for maintaining an overview of the hall, its suitability for use and its attractiveness to potential hirers, thereby ensuring a more proactive stance in relation to the maintenance and enhancement of the hall than hitherto.
- 4.3 It may be appropriate at this point to consider a broader concept – that of the Parish Council’s vision for the future of its assets, and more particularly for the future amenities it offers to Pickmere’s community. Some years ago, when the future of the land bordering the lake (now referred to as the IROS) was very uncertain, the Parish Council agreed to take on ownership of and responsibility for that land (and at a similar period the Clover Drive play area and the two sites at Clover Drive/Park Lane) when offered by developers. At that point, presumably, the Council had a vision of the contributions that Parish Council ownership of these sites might bring to Pickmere’s residents. However, along with those benefits have come some costs. Some costs have been financial – in terms of the continuing expense of maintenance of these sites, but some of the land (in particular the IROS) has brought problems with it – namely the problem of excessive visitors to the lake and the parking etc difficulties that have followed. However it is your Clerk’s view that overall, most Pickmere residents would probably consider that the results of the achieved vision have been strongly positive.
- 4.4 It is suggested that, in making a decision now on the question of property strategy, members should similarly consider what vision the Council should have in relation to the future of its buildings.
- 4.5 Finally, in considering the above, it might be worthwhile for members to visit one or two other broadly similar village/parish halls in the locality so as to provide some sort of context for decisions on these questions.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1 That members give consideration to the report and the options suggested.
- 5.2 That members seek to visit several other village/parish halls in the locality to provide a context for decisions.

Jack Steel
Clerk to the Parish Council