

Beckley and Stowood Parish – The Village Hall Development Plan

Report on a questionnaire survey, October 2010

1. Background

The efforts of those who in the 1980s acquired and refurbished the present village hall have been well rewarded. The hall has made possible a wide variety of community activities over the quarter of a century that it has stood in its present location beside the playing field, and it has come to be a resource that parishioners perhaps take for granted. However, it has always been recognised that the temporary nature of the building meant that it could not be expected to have a long life and, indeed, a recent survey confirmed that deterioration of the structure could not any longer be ignored.

In order to consider the future of the village hall, the Village Hall Committee formed the Beckley Village Hall Building Committee (BVHBC). This committee felt that if the village was to continue to sustain the level of community activity that had characterised village life for so long, and provide a venue for any extension of the social life of the village that might be wanted in the future, it was essential to find a way to replace the building. Although it was recognised that any development initiated would take place in a difficult financial climate, the BVHBC was encouraged by the Oxfordshire Rural Communities Council (ORCC) to embark on an appropriate development plan to build a new village hall.

The advice of the ORCC was that success in getting financial support for the project depended on several factors: the level of leadership and self-help that the village could itself provide for taking forward the project; the success of local fund-raising; and, finally, the conviction that the views of the village had been widely canvassed in shaping the plans for a new hall. The BVHBC started with this need to consult by arranging open evenings in June 2010 to elicit opinion on the issues surrounding the proposed development. These events were not well attended, but the comments and views gathered nevertheless provided a sufficient basis for putting together a questionnaire which was to be distributed to all households in the parish, in order to survey opinion as widely as possible. This document reports on the results of that survey.

2. Scope of the Questionnaire Survey

It was important not to limit the scope of the survey in any way. It was designed therefore so that all households in the parish would receive a copy of the questionnaire, and the questionnaire itself would provide for a response from two people in each household, over the age of 16. In distributing the questionnaires the BVHBC, using local knowledge, was able to locate 203 households in the parish; this was a figure somewhat lower than the census figure of 2001 (231) and the similar figure of 230 estimated by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) in 2008. The discrepancy between the number of

households to which the committee chose to deliver a questionnaire and the official figures may be explained in part by a few properties that were known to be unoccupied.

More important figures provided by the ONS are those for the village of Beckley (with Stowood) that exclude the 51 households in Wick Farm, at the edge of Barton estate, and whose occupants might be thought to be sufficiently remote from the village hall to be less likely to have views on the Beckley facility than on the community resources in the neighbouring estate. ONS estimates gave a figure of 150 for the number of households and 395 for the population of Beckley with Stowood, and this perhaps provides a more realistic context for the response that was obtained.

Of the 203 questionnaires delivered throughout the parish, 106 (52%) were returned, though from the 150 households in the village the response was higher: 66%. In about three-quarters of all cases there were two responses in each questionnaire returned, giving a total of 179 respondents. Again using ONS estimates as a comparison, this indicates that responses were obtained from about 55% of the population of the parish over age 16. In respect of the length of time that respondents had lived in the village, there was a fairly even distribution among all groups. Those who had lived in Beckley for between 6 and 15 years represented a third of all respondents, while for the other 3 groups, 0-5 years, 16-29 years and over 30 years, the figures ranged from 20% to 24%.

From these figures, although adequate for the purpose of establishing a fair picture of opinion in the parish, it is perhaps less easy to claim that the response to the questionnaire was totally representative of the views of the parish as a whole. There were 9% more female respondents than male, compared with a difference of less than 1% in the ONS estimates of 2008. The age groups of the respondents showed a similarly marked difference with ONS estimates. Forty four per cent of those responding were over 60; 38% were age 45-60; and just 18% were under 45. ONS categories are not exactly the same as those used in the questionnaire, though their estimates of 60% of working age in the parish population, and 21% of pensionable age, suggest that respondents to the questionnaire were weighed heavily in favour of older groups. Even if there is a trend towards an older population this cannot account for such differences. A more likely explanation is that younger age groups, for whom the difficulty of balancing childcare, work and leisure makes it less likely that they would be involved in community activities, and would therefore be less motivated to respond to the questionnaire. Although around 30% of the returns were from households with children under 16, the relatively smaller body of evidence from younger people in the parish would be one issue to take into account when planning future developments.

3. Use of the Village Hall

A starting point for any development of the village hall facility is to acquire a detailed picture of how it is presently used. A useful source of information about the use of the village hall is the record kept by the booking secretary. The records for 2009 and 2010 show that the regular meetings of local organisations account on average for about 15 of the occasions on which the hall is hired each month. There are in addition a number of

other events (8 were identified in the records) which take place mostly about once a year, and more frequent hiring for village social events and private functions. There are about 30 of these each year, though about half are for the months of June and July. With an average of around 18 bookings per month in total it could be argued that there remains at least some potential for increasing the scope of the use that presently the village hall is put to, particularly outside the summer months.

In order to establish a more detailed picture of the use of the village hall the questionnaire asked which activities were undertaken and how frequently this had involved attendance at the hall over the last year. A significant proportion was found to have taken part in activities at the hall 'very rarely' (21%) or 'not at all' (20%). The largest group was those using the hall 'on a few occasions each year' (41%). The smallest proportion (17%) was the group using the hall most frequently - at least once a month. Those using the hall most frequently were more likely to be female than male, age 45 or over, living in the centre of the village or in the Woodperry Road area, and resident in the village for longer than others, though in this last case the differences compared with other groups were not great. It should be borne in mind when considering these figures that among those failing to return the questionnaire there are likely to be fewer who have used the hall over the last year than among those responding.

The question that investigated support for activities taking place provided an inclusive list of 12 activities (or categories of activity) so that respondents could indicate all of the occasions that they had used the village hall over the last year. Those who gave replies (54%) each indicated an average of 5 out of the 12 activities. The proportions for each item ranged from 3% to 58% of the total response. There is no particular surprise in finding that the activities attracting the least support (3% to 5%) were for special interests (pilates, art club and handbell ringers), and those getting most support, social events open to the whole community, bonfire night (58%) and other social events (42%). 37% had attended a private party, 25% had supported arts week and the same proportion had been at meetings held in the hall. 12% had attended meetings of the Women's Institute. Meanwhile it should be remembered that 46% of respondents to the questionnaire as a whole do not appear in these figures, so, while they show that the village hall is quite widely used and for a variety of activities, it could perhaps serve many more in the community.

An important question for the future is whether the support of the village for the hall could be increased. There may be a case for improving the promotion of events at the village hall: 16% appeared to have been unable at least once to get tickets (though this may have been because the sale of tickets were restricted by the capacity of the hall), and 28% had not been aware that an event was taking place. The issue of the advertising of events was pursued in another question which aimed to find out which one of six different means of advertising were thought to be most useful. Unfortunately many respondents misread the instruction and ticked more than one box. In spite of this, it was clear that people most commonly learnt of an event being held at the hall through the newsletters circulated in the village, in particular through the Beckley Village Newsletter. Less than half of all respondents indicated that they would find it useful to get such

information by email. The scope for broadening support lies also in an extension of the use of the hall to cater for the widest possible range of interests. This question is explored in the following section.

4. Future use of the village hall and sports field

A first priority when planning a new facility would be of course to ensure that all those activities that currently take place at the village hall are able to continue. If, however, the commercial viability of the hall were to depend on extending its use, it is important to find out whether first there is the potential for increasing support from within the village, as well as seeking an increase in the rental income.

A question was asked to establish whether those who had not taken part in any activities over the last year might do so in the coming year. Almost twice as many said 'yes' as 'no', while over half of all replies indicated 'not sure'. The numbers here, however, were very small. A further question sought to find out whether there were social and fundraising events, other than those that had previously been held, that might be supported. 19% of respondents gave no reply, compared to 46% to the question enquiring about activities they had been involved in over the last year, suggesting that among the respondents to this question there were a number who had not attended events at the village hall, at least recently. Eight activities were listed, including 'other' that allowed for suggestions, and each respondent indicated around three of these. The events most frequently endorsed were film shows (50% of those responding to the question), musical events (42%), quiz nights (41%), car boot sales (39%) and tabletop sales (31%). Events for specific groups (senior citizens, mothers and toddlers), attracted support from between 8% and 14%, while 25 respondents made between them around 15 additional suggestions for both social and fundraising events that they would like to see arranged in the future. For each of these proposed activities listed in the question, except the mothers and toddlers group, and for those suggested in addition, there were up to 11 people responding who indicated a willingness to make a contribution to the organisation that would be necessary to ensure its success. There are clearly messages here for ways in which the use of the village hall could be extended, and ideas for events, both social and fundraising, that could involve more people in the community.

The sports field situated beside the village hall is not as well used by inhabitants of Beckley as at times in the past. It was felt important to find out as part of the survey whether there is potential for greater use of this facility, in order to inform at the same time any plans that might be made for the design of a new hall.

A question about the interest that there might be in organised sport elicited few responses: 5 would take part in football, 13 in cricket, 30 in tennis, and among the other sports there were 4 mentions of badminton, 2 of netball, one of table tennis, and references to fitness activities. Another question asked if there were young people under 16 in the household who would take part regularly in organised sport. Here the numbers, though greater for football (14), are similar: 14 for cricket, 21 for tennis, 3 for rounders, one for rugby, and mentions of other indoor games and activities as in the previous

question. As far as the use of the playing field is concerned, these numbers are relatively small even if they might ask whether, for example, football and cricket teams could be formed. Some sports mentioned - badminton, table tennis – require an indoor facility that in some cases could only be provided by a hall that was designed appropriately. The viability of sport in the village depends even more on the willingness of organisers. In answer to a question seeking to establish whether there would be leadership or help for the organisation of football there were 2 positive replies, for cricket 3 and for tennis 4. One respondent offered to organise ‘dance/ballet’.

5. Replacing the village hall

Before taking forward any plans for replacing the village hall it was recognised by the BVHBC that the views of the whole village, as well as of those who had been regular users of the hall facility, should be taken into account. This was a central concern when designing the questionnaire survey. A key question asked simply if there was a strong case for building a new hall. Overall, the response was very positive: 68% said ‘yes’, 6% said ‘no’ and 25% said that they didn’t know. There were no marked differences when this question was analysed with respect to gender, age group and length of time living in the village, though those living at the further reaches of the parish were more likely to have given no reply.

A further question seeking to obtain a more nuanced picture of opinion about the need to replace the hall required a choice of one statement from among five. The statement ‘a new village hall with a more varied function’ was chosen by 53%, and ‘a new village hall performing its present function is a high priority’ by 12%. Taken together there are therefore 65% of respondents who endorse unequivocally the need for a new hall. Meanwhile, those choosing the other statements - ‘the village has many needs and a new village hall is just one of them’ (16%), ‘we should try and make do with the present village hall’ (12%), and ‘there are other buildings that could serve the same purpose as the village hall (1%) – are likely to include many who are sympathetic to the aim of replacing the hall while remaining less than optimistic about the prospects for getting the necessary support. These figures help also to explain the 25% who were unable to answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the previous question.

When a question was asked about the broader considerations of the design of the hall, over 55% chose ‘what the hall is used for’ as the most important factor. Of the three other factors to choose from, 26% of respondents chose ‘potential for rental income’, 10%, ‘how the hall looks from outside’, and 8%, ‘how effectively running costs can be reduced’. It is perhaps surprising that this last option, reflecting as it does the environmental concerns that might be taken into account in rebuilding, should be chosen by the fewest people. It may be because the option was thought to be compatible with the practical and commercial approach to planning which respondents chose to put first.

In order to find out what was thought about the particular facilities that should be provided by a new hall, respondents were asked to choose three from a list of eight. The largest numbers chose ‘more space inside the hall’ (46%) and ‘space to accommodate a

shop/post office' (44%). Around a quarter of all respondents chose 'more spacious kitchen', 'space for indoor sport', 'flexible internal space (e.g. partitions)' and 'separate studio/meeting room'. Some of these features are not mutually exclusive, nor do they imply a realistic assessment of prospects, but the choices that were made do appear to give an indication of the interests of those responding and the priority that they accord to particular aspects of any proposed design.

The same question allowed for suggestions of facilities other than those listed. Few took this opportunity (9 people in all) and most of the suggestions made were for more specific aspects of the design of the hall: storage space, lighting, use of curtains. One respondent, however, went beyond the intended scope of the question to comment that it is difficult to make a judgement about facilities that might be needed, without considering first the sharing of facilities, both between institutions within the village, and with neighbouring villages. These different options have evidently been examined by the BVHBC, though no such arrangement for accommodating village hall functions has been found to be feasible.

6. Supporting the development plan

It was noted at the beginning of this brief report that, in addition to the need to consult widely, the BVHBC would also have to get support from the village if an action plan for replacing the hall was to be drawn up, and the development undertaken. Experience from projects proven to be successful in other villages have shown that this support has been in the form of fundraising, in providing leadership to drive the project forward, and in making practical, technical and professional skills available where they are likely to make savings. One way in which parishes have in many situations been able to provide for amenities in the village has been by raising funds directly through the precept – the part of the council tax raised for the sole use of the parish. The willingness of people in Beckley to support the village hall project in this way was tested in a question asking whether they would agree to a contribution raised through the precept. Over five times as many people said 'yes' as said 'no' (59% compared with 11%), while 24% were 'not sure'.

Although several events to raise funds have been held over the last year or so, the survey was a useful opportunity to find out how these might be extended and to identify those willing to help with their organisation. One in five of respondents made suggestions for activities that had not already been identified in the questionnaire. There were over 30 of these and many that have not, in the recent past at least, been pursued in Beckley. Even more encouragingly, there were an equal number of people who indicated that they would be willing to organise or help to organise activities proposed. This information is collated elsewhere and will provide useful ideas and support for fundraising efforts. Other information elicited by the questionnaire concerned the skills and interests that might be found in the village and which could be harnessed in support of the development. The response to this is also collated elsewhere and shows that there are around 30 people (17%) willing to help with a variety of skills and interests. The 26% of

the response that indicated 'not sure' suggests that there may be more resources to call upon in the village than it first appears.

7 Summary and conclusions

- Questionnaires were returned from 52% of the households in the parish to which they were delivered and from 66% of the households in the village.
- The village hall has over the last two years been used on average about 18 times each month.
- 80% of all those responding to the questionnaire had taken part recently in an activity at the village hall. About 60% had done so on at least a few occasions each year.
- About half of all those responding to the questionnaire had attended the village hall for an average of 5 different activities.
- About 80% expected they would attend the village hall for new events.
- 24 people said they were willing to organise or help to organise new activities.
- Small though significant numbers of people, including young people under 16, would take part in football, cricket and tennis if these were organised.
- Over two-thirds of people thought that there was a strong case for building a new hall. Only 6% did not think so.
- The features that were considered of greatest importance in making provision in a new hall were: more space; and space for a shop/post office. Also thought important were: a more spacious kitchen; space for sport; a separate studio/meeting room; and flexible space (e.g. partitions).
- Over half thought that a new hall should primarily cater for activities presently envisaged, and about a quarter, that it should prioritise rental income.
- A significant number of people had suggestions for new activities that could be held in the village hall and some of these would offer to organise them.
- About 60% of people would be willing to make a contribution to the village hall building fund through the parish precept. About 10% were unwilling to do so.

One conclusion that can be drawn from the survey results is that there is broad support for the aim of replacing the village hall. A number of comments submitted, however, serve to warn against hasty or ill-considered development. There was more than one voice, for example, that pointed to the need to examine the scope for sharing facilities with other institutions in the village, and beyond, before accepting that the only solution was to rebuild. Although such arrangements have been successful elsewhere they would depend not only on the willingness of partners and a judgement that they would be mutually beneficial, but crucially for the community, there should also be an assurance that the facilities expected of the village hall would not be diminished. The strength of the arguments made for replacing the hall on its present site rests particularly on ease of access and on the availability of parking, in contrast to locations in the heart of the village.

Another comment warns against the temptation to develop plans for the hall that cater for activities that may not have substantial support and which turn out to be uneconomic. This argues, according to some other comments, for a focus that keeps in mind the central functions of the hall, the urgent need to recognise the environmental aspects of construction and energy production, and the importance of remaining competitive in seeking to increase rental income which is critical to the commercial viability of the hall. These conclusions are likely to be the starting point for any planning undertaken by the BVHBC.