

UPDATE ON THE COMMUNITY HALLS STRATEGY

This information note provides feedback on the resolutions made by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting of 6 October 2011 following a 'Member Call In', subsequent to the recommendation made by Cabinet at its meeting of 27 September 2011 to adopt and implement the Community Halls Strategy.

1 Background

Following the recommendation by Cabinet on 27 September 2011 for the adoption and implementation of the Community Halls Strategy, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as a result of a 'Member Call In', reviewed that decision in the light of points put to it.

As a result of that review three recommendations were made by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as follows:-

(1) That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee review the implementation of the Community Halls Strategy in twelve months time, particularly in regard to figures such as the 40 % uplift for urban community halls and the benchmark of 0.1m² per person for community halls;

(2) That the Head of Policy and Community Services be requested to circulate a briefing note to all Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee regarding the criteria applied in the assessment of Discretionary Rate Relief;

(3) That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee welcomed the offer made by the Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs to request Cabinet to strengthen Minute 46, Resolution (1) regarding Bancroft Hall and Brotherhood Hall as detailed above.

This information note provides detailed feedback on the first of these recommendations to update Members as requested, based on further work undertaken by officers, and evidence from exercises and events in respect of the Council's managed halls which can also be used to provide further information on the recommendation. Progress with regard to recommendations 2) and 3) above is also included.

2. Response to recommendation (1)

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee review the implementation of the Community Halls Strategy in twelve months time, particularly in regard to figures such as the 40 % uplift for urban community halls and the benchmark of 0.1m² per person for community halls;

2.1 Analysis

a) The 40 % uplift for urban community halls

In section 11.9 of the Community Halls Strategy, from research undertaken in its development, a figure of 40% uplift is given as an assessment of the additional community hall floor space provision in North Hertfordshire provided by 'other facilities' over and above that by the urban halls and community centres in the District.

This was an assessed figure made on the basis of the research that was possible of those other facilities in the development of the strategy and on the knowledge and experience of officers and others involved during that time.

To prove conclusively that this is the absolute standard is of course difficult with extensive officer time required, the resultant costs, and the possible need for more intrusive and arguably impractical surveys of all of the 'other facilities' identified in the establishment of the strategy.

However since the publication of this figure in the strategy three notable events have occurred in the District in respect of community halls in 2012 which supports this level of assessment and indicates that the overall extent of urban community hall provision does in fact exceed that currently or likely to be required. This arguably makes any calls for new community hall builds in the District's urban areas, certainly on the basis of under-capacity, and where these calls include requests for financial support from the Council, rather questionable.

The three events discussed above are explained as follows:-

i) The closure of Hitchin Town Hall for refurbishment

Hitchin Town Hall closed for major refurbishment at the end of October 2012 and is due to reopen as a Community Hall and Museum facility in November 2014. At its height, since the Community Halls Strategy was adopted, around eighteen regular hire groups operated at the hall on a weekly (some more than once a week) / monthly basis. All of these hire groups were required to find alternative accommodation during the period whilst the town hall is closed.

During 2012, using information of community centres and 'other facilities' compiled in the establishment of the strategy, all of these facilities were contacted by officers with detailed usage information of the town halls regular hire groups to see if any were interested in offering them alternative accommodation. The response was very positive with interest expressed by many facilities. Details of the responses were passed back to the hire groups with an invitation to them to contact the facilities that responded in order to explore possibilities of moving to one or more of them as mutually convenient in the lead up to the closure of the town hall.

This exercise involved extensive liaison between officers, the hire groups, and the alternative facilities and it can be reported that the exercise was a notable success in that feedback received indicated all groups concerned were able to decamp from the town hall to other local community facilities and, importantly, to their satisfaction.

This exercise was a gradual one over many months, and whilst of course it had an increasing negative impact on town hall revenues it did demonstrate that, with flexibility and without a predetermined insistence of getting exactly a 'like for like' alternative hire position, overall local community facility capacity sufficient to meet the demands of those exiting Hitchin Town Hall not only existed, but evidently existed to the levels and configurations required.

ii) The closure of Brotherhood Hall in Letchworth for refurbishment

In May 2012 Brotherhood Hall was closed by the Council for a period of four weeks for extensive refurbishment. At the time a total of eight regular hire groups occupied the building on a weekly basis. Through officer contact with other community facilities in Letchworth all but one of the hire groups was successful in finding alternative temporary accommodation. The single 'exception' group did have possible alternative accommodation available but decided instead to cease operating temporarily during the closure period.

This relocation exercise of course again involved a degree of flexibility by the groups concerned but it did allow them to continue operating during the buildings period of closure. On completion of the refurbishment exercise all of the hire groups returned to the Brotherhood Hall.

This situation also took place of course within the backdrop of the recent closure of Plinston Hall in Letchworth which resulted in the displacement of various community hire groups. Although one of those groups had already transitioned to Brotherhood Hall some months earlier, in anticipation of being displaced, it would appear that other such groups were able to find suitable alternative accommodation to their satisfaction suggesting that there was evidently still sufficient community facility space available locally elsewhere.

This again would appear to support the view that given the known capacity of community space provided by urban managed halls and community centres, when the extent of 'other facility' capacity is added there is sufficient overall hall space in Letchworth to meet the demand for hall hire.

iii) Advertising

In March 2012 an advertising campaign was undertaken in the local press in respect of the vacant hire potential of Bancroft Hall in Hitchin and Brotherhood Hall in Letchworth. A half page advertisement was placed in the Comet newspaper supported by the display of the same advertisement on the papers website for a period of three months.

Contrary perhaps to challenges put forward when the Community Halls Strategy was first published in draft for public consultation there was no positive impact on the two halls hire profiles directly attributable to, or as a result of, the advertisement.

Enquiries for hire periods did not increase nor were any new hire groups taken on as a direct result of the advertising. From this one could conclude that there is no latent unfulfilled demand from the local and wider population for community hall hire in Hitchin or Letchworth and perhaps the wider District generally, as has been suggested by a small number of residents, and that in fact again it can be judged that the extent of total urban community hall hire capacity, including the estimated 40% uplift figure provided via 'other facilities', meets or continues to exceed current and foreseeable demands.

A subsequent placement of the same advertisement discussed above in the Winter edition of the NHDC 'Outlook' magazine, distributed to all households in the District is to be undertaken in November of this year. It is hoped that this new attempt to attract more hirers for Bancroft Hall and Brotherhood Hall will be more successful than previously, especially as both halls have hourly hire rates which are below those of surrounding community or church halls, a material factor to prospective hirers.

b) The benchmark of 0.1m² space per person for community halls;

In Section 11 'Future Provision' of the Community Halls Strategy, from research undertaken, and supported by information shown in section 11.9, Table 14 a standard of 0.1m² of floor space per person for community halls was established as the rationale for community facilities in North Hertfordshire.

Following the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 6 October 2011, in order to further test this standard for reasonableness, a research exercise was undertaken during the early months of 2012 to validate further that suggested level of provision.

Using the governments 'Directgov' database, and excluding any of the authorities taken into account in the establishment of the standard shown the Community Halls Strategy (Table14), forty six local authorities in the east of England were contacted so see if they too had undertaken research to establish any similar statistics to those published in the Councils halls strategy.

The survey covered authorities in Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Norfolk Hertfordshire, and Suffolk, and included county, city, borough and district councils plus unitary authorities.

A total of twenty authorities responded to the request for information. Of those, twelve said that they had not undertaken anything similar to the exercise performed by the this authority with regards to community halls provision. One authority replied to say that it had undertaken something similar, the remainder provided no further information to their initial response.

The authority that replied to say that it had undertaken something similar was Bedford Borough Council. Whilst not entirely consistent with the work undertaken by NHDC to establish the Community Halls Strategy, this authority had undertaken a an 'Open Space, Sport and Recreation Study' in 2007 which looked at village hall 'type' space as it is one of the typologies in its 'Planning Policy Guidance' documentation. In this work the standards that the consultants, who were employed to undertake the research, established that for small halls and community venues there was 146m² small hall/community venue space per 1000 population, and also that a 20 minute travel time (walking in urban area, drive time in a rural area) was the determined acceptable standard.

As best as can be aligned therefore with our own work, both of these figures compare very favourably with the NHDC standards as shown below:-

<u>Standard / person</u>	NHDC	0.10m ² #
	Bedford Borough Council	0.146m ²

Ref Table 14 of the Community Halls Strategy

<u>Travel time to a facility</u>	NHDC	15 – 20 mins ##
	Bedford Borough Council	20 mins

Ref Section 12.1.3 of the Community Halls Strategy

On the basis of this survey it would appear that not only is North Hertfordshire District Council very much at the forefront in undertaking such a level of detailed analysis into the provision of community halls space in its area of authority but also, in addition to those other authorities whose data was shown in Table 14 of the strategy document, only one other additional authority could be found in the east of England that has undertaken any similar analysis and that authority's findings supported the views and standards expressed in the NHDC Community Halls Strategy.

2.2 Conclusion

That as far as can be established on the basis of the research and analysis undertaken, since the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 6 October 2011, both standards that are the subject of this recommendation can be supported

3. Response to recommendation (2)

That the Head of Policy and Community Services be requested to circulate a briefing note to all Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee regarding the criteria applied in the assessment of Discretionary Rate Relief;

A briefing note was prepared by Mark Scanes and circulated to members on 6th January 2012.

4. Response to recommendation (3)

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee welcomed the offer made by the Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs to request Cabinet to strengthen Minute 46, Resolution (1) regarding Bancroft Hall and Brotherhood Hall as detailed above.

At the 8 November 2011 Cabinet meeting it was resolved: That the Minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held on 27 September 2011 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and signed by the Chairman, subject to the addition of the words “and with particular regard to the future of Bancroft Hall and Brotherhood Hall as set out above” in resolution (1) of Minute 47 – Community Halls Strategy.

With the final minute then reading;

- “(1) That Cabinet be requested to review the proposed floor space standard at 0.1 square metres per person used as a basis for negotiation for new development and to use a new appropriate benchmark for examining current levels of provision and consider increasing the standard to a more appropriate level, and with particular regard to the future of Bancroft Hall and Brotherhood Hall as set out above

5. Future Proposals

Officers will continue to seek evidence to validate the two standards which are the subject of recommendation 1) above, where that evidence exists and is cost effective and feasible to obtain.

Similarly work will also continue to take account of variations to local planning policy and any resultant amendments to population growth forecasts that may impact upon the ratio for hall space as set out, in the strategy, also incorporating the latest and most relevant information regarding hall availability/usage following changes to the Districts halls, i.e. the completion of Royston Town Hall refurbishment and the re-opening of the District Museum and Community Facility (Hitchin Town Hall scheme).

6) Related Documents

- a) NHDC Community Halls Strategy, Version 1, dated October 2011

7) Contact Officers

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