

## Making Community Halls Sustainable

### Notes for Managers of community halls

**A Community Hall usually needs 3 elements -**

- (1) Good community use and support**
- (2) Financial sustainability**
- (3) A good reputation.**

### Community vs Commerce

The halls must be valued (and used) by the community if they are to be self-sustaining. Keeping community interest alive is the key. Community halls need to support the WHOLE community if possible, so how does the hall ensure it caters for all? Where commercial events are run to cross subsidise the running costs of the hall there needs to be a balance so that the community recognise the value of this to their venue. They mustn't see it as a displacing of community activity, but as a help in sustaining it.

Those Community Halls which claim discretionary rate relief are somewhat constrained in levels of commercial use if they wish to keep claiming this relief. Evidently if a good commercial deal is available it might be appropriate to forego the discretionary relief (a few hundred pounds). Generally Community Halls eligible for this relief should not see it as a major constraint.

The rules require that not more than 20 days of commercial hiring be permitted. By commercial hiring the Council means hirings through which a private hirer intends to make a personal or private profit through commercial sales etc (e.g. book fairs, auctions). It is not intended to limit the hall from being let for private events (e.g. weddings) nor even for a beneficial community event or the hall bringing in an activity (eg a coach offering to run an aerobics class, or running a charitable sale of work).

### SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities & threats)

Think about what is good and bad about the hall. Where does it have advantages to users over other halls - you need to make something of this. Have an idea on what things can be improved to make the hall even more useful or attractive to users (don't have to be big things).

### Know costs and income

Work out your average expenditure per half day (in terms of the number of half days you normally let the hall). How does the cost relate to your actual charges? Make sure you include everything in your outgoings (do you have a 'sinking fund' for major repairs?).

### Reducing expenditure - Cut waste

Have you properly looked at wasted expenditure? Do you need to clean regularly, or just when the hall is being hired? Can you reduce any vandalism or loss in a cost effective way? Have you reviewed your practices to see they're not "just because we've always done it like that"?

### Reducing Expenditure - share

Could you share a website, marketing information, a caretaker, a committee with other halls or charities? Could you get better deals on supplies by sharing a larger purchase order? What about sharing, or doing a deal, with a local pub or other commercial venture?

### Reducing expenditure - get best deals

Have you checked out other electricity/gas/insurance etc prices lately? What about your other suppliers, will they give you a better deal if you threaten to look elsewhere?

### Reducing expenditure - flexible staffing

Do you employ anyone? Is their contract flexible enough? Will they do all the things you need them to do but only when you need it done? Is the cost of their employment matched by proportionate income or other benefit?

### Reducing expenditure - Using volunteers (pros and cons)

Have you actively 'advertised' for specific volunteers to do specific small jobs? People may be reluctant to take on big roles and may be reluctant to put forward their names for poorly defined "work".

Is it worth considering a "friends of" organisation? Could you give "loyalty points" to volunteers for money off at the bar or whatever?

Volunteers are cheap but you cannot compel them, so they may not necessarily be reliably available, when you need them, nor do what you want. Is this a problem if you're trying to offer a consistent and reliable service?

### Reducing expenditure - finding gifts and "in kind"

No doubt you seek prizes for raffles etc but have you thought about other 'in-kind' contributions that other local organisations may make? Will they do a fund-raiser for you? Will they donate the time of their accountant? Do they have useful contacts they could share? Do they have materials you need?

### Increasing income - grants

Have you looked for grants which may be available?

Are you aware of grant advice that may be available from East Devon District Council, East Devon Volunteer Services Agency, and Devon Community Council?

Is your organisation structured in a way that makes it 'grant friendly'? Are you a charity (NB there may be some downsides too)? Do you have an open and involving style for the whole community or are you restricting your 'membership' and 'users'? Do you have a clear structure, a

business plan, a clear sense of what you want to achieve? Do you have other friendly sponsors who can give you a reference? Do you make extra efforts to include various minority groups?

### Increasing Income - sponsorship

Have you approached possible sponsors stating a clear purpose to which their money will specifically be put? Have you tailored your sponsorship requests to the most likely sponsors? Do you have something that clearly explains the role and benefits of your venue? Are you prepared, and do you say, that you may give 'advertising space' to your sponsors?

### Increasing income - charges and rents

Know how your hire charges relate to your costs (see above). Leave yourself a margin for flexibility on charging for events you really want or need. Structure your charges so that you charge more for times that everyone wants, and less for times you find hard to let.

Leave yourself space to charge commercial organisations a different and fully commercial rent, not the same amount you charge community groups and charities.

Talk to your users before setting new charges, the more they understand what you are trying to achieve with your charges the more they will feel able to accept them.

Compare your charges to other venues but 'play up' your unique advantages. If you are the only hall in the area that can seat 100 you should charge more than a hall that seats 50.

Make your hall an appealing prospect to hirers. Is it freshly decorated and scrupulously clean?

Does someone welcome you in?

Does someone set out the hall for their needs?

Can catering or a bar be arranged for users where required?

Do you have a flip chart stand or projector? All these things may 'add value'.

Is it easy to book your hall? People won't bother if it's hard to find a contact name?

Can your hall be found on the internet, try "Googling" it. What if people don't know the name of your hall can they "Google" it by the area you are based in?

Does your hall have a name or reputation that needs changing?

### Other income

Bars, tea bars, catering etc may be a good way to make extra money. However they also may cost money to set up, licence, comply with the law etc. Have you worked out a proper business case?

Can you trial it in some way without becoming committed to it?

Who will use it, what will they want to buy?

Will they be prepared to pay the prices you'll need to charge?

Normally these elements are, and should be, the most ruthlessly commercial. This may be a way to keep your hall sustainable. As such you may need proper advice and a commercial style set up. This is not an area for compromise. Do it well and maximise income for the hall, (sharing profits, relying on volunteers etc may not be appropriately business-like).

## Loans

Ensure that loans are for things that are either essential or will "pay their way". Never take out a loan unless you have very clear financial control and a viable business plan.

## Clever bookings

If you book a single event at a low charge well in advance you are committed to honouring it. What if this then stood in the way of a high value booking, a block booking or a weeks hire. Structure the bookings approach so that you consciously balance (1) Community use (2) Income (3) Reputation (key things we mentioned before).

Do you charge a deposit for a booking? If you are let down will you be able to make up the loss of income?

Don't allow your committee to veto users just because they haven't ever been allowed before, or because they "aren't what we do round here". Your role as a community hall is to get good "community use and support" so don't preclude certain parts of your community getting their wishes met. You may never have allowed a young people's band to rehearse in your hall before and maybe apprehensive about it but why not have a trial run to see if it works?

Is one person in charge of your bookings? This helps to achieve clever interlinking of bookings to maximise use of the hall, but the person may also need some advice and guidance, and to report back to your committee and users' groups to ensure they have support and continue to meet the needs of the hall.

## New Markets

It is probably not sufficient to rely on bookings coming to you.

Is your committee actively exploring and approaching possible new users?

Have you sat down to positively think about this?

Do other people have any ideas? What about your regular users or the Parish/Town Council?

What else would your hall be suitable for - is it the right dimensions for badminton, or bowls or other physical activity?

Does it have a section or rooms that could be separately let? What about a permanent commercial let for part of the premises, is it permissible & possible?

## Sharp Marketing

Your best marketing is word of mouth (and its free). Thus the more you can do to make the hall welcoming, appealing and suitable to your customers the more likely they will be satisfied and tell their friends.

You have a ready made market focus group (your regular users) do you have regular meetings with them? Ask them what small things would make a difference.

Ask any new users how they found out about the hall.

Ask all users, at the end of their hiring, to fill out a satisfaction and comments sheet.  
Don't spend a lot on brochures, events lists etc unless you know you'll get the costs back, and the reality of the hall matches up to your claims. Often 'free advertising' can be through clever press releases about improvements to the hall, a special event, a change in pricing, a new facility or whatever.

Note the earlier point about an internet 'presence'. If you can't create your own website why not piggyback on someone else's (the Parish or Town Council?) Ideally you should at least post information about the facilities available (including car parking, disability accessibility, services you can also book) and a contact number of e-mail for bookings.

Lots of other free advertising might be found through notice boards, in the pub, shop windows, other venues (not necessarily just local - what about agreeing to publicise your local sports centre in exchange for them publicising your hall?)

### Risk Management

A big potential unforeseen cost (to your purse or reputation) is from hazards. Have you checked the safety of your hall, are you well insured, is the hall and contents well secured, is there a reasonable level of vandal and arson resistance where there is a risk of this?

### Cash Flow and contingencies

Just like at home, some months all the bills and costs seem to come at once. Have you looked at how income and expenditure usually ebb and flow across the months?

What months are you left short?

How can you create a "financial cushion" to stop this happening or becoming a problem if something unforeseen happens?

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*These notes are not intended to be a comprehensive guide but come from a number of people with experience of running community venues we hope they are useful..*

*If you have any extra ideas, or disagree with some of these please contact:*

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