

Is it in the best interests of Inkpen residents to retain the Village Hall and Memorial Playing Field sites as separate entities, or to have one single venue?

The Village of Inkpen

Inkpen is a dispersed community that has been kept integrated by its dispersed facilities, facilities such as St Michael's Church and church room, the Crown and Garter, Inkpen Primary School, the small industrial complex, the village hall, the playing field, the common, various farms and estates, and, activities like open gardens and Inkpen walks.

If we were to lose the Crown and Garter, what would Rook's Nest Road become? Housing with a through road. If we lose the Swan PH, what will Craven Road become? Housing with a through road. If we lose the village hall, what would Hazelwick become?

As shown in the Village Design Statement of 2004, Inkpen is a collection of hamlets, not a centralised village as is commonly the case for villages. This collection of small communities making up Inkpen, is a historic legacy. It is what Inkpen is, and it defines the character of the village. The Village Hall and the IMPFT (Playing Field Trust) are a part and a reflection of that character.

Distributed facilities link these hamlets providing contact and community through activity. They serve an important social function above and beyond their basic purpose. The loss of assets like the Saw Mills, the Post Office (to those who remember it) and more recently, the loss of the Swan PH, these leave an absence, a deficit and an emptiness behind them. It is not a tangible thing or something that has an obvious financial value but it is there non-the-less.

Coalescing the IMPFT and Village Hall charitable facilities would further dilute our village's character, change the balance of the village, and remove important activity linkages within the village.

Looking at the village as it is right now, the arguments for a single combined facility or maintaining the status quo are summarised below. They focus on the use of the playing field site and not on the opportunities that are available for the village hall to develop its own identity and improve its facility. To that extent it is a very one-sided view.

1. A Village View

1.1 A single venue combining the pavilion and village hall at the playing field site, will focus traffic and noise, and increase the frequency of both. With the current two venues this is diluted and is tolerable for residents. A single venue could be more intrusive and annoying for the nearby residents.

1.2 There is a substantial level of support and fondness amongst residents for keeping these two charitable sites.

1.3 Both facilities are modest and this is their great strength. Two modest sites for village activity is our best hope for sustainability and will help us to ride out fluctuations in demand in the future, just as it has in the past.

1.4 The "All eggs in one basket" approach of a single combined facility cannot be undone. If we opt for a single combined facility and it becomes too costly to run, Inkpen will have lost both the playing field and village hall, with no turning back.

1.5 If the current pavilion improvement plans are rejected then the funds that have been raised for it will be withdrawn. If the village hall was sold to pay for a new grander pavilion, the money realised from its sale would be slightly more but of the same order as that currently being raised. Is it worth losing the village hall for such a small financial benefit?

1.6 Selling the village hall to achieve an improved single facility is a trick that can only be used once. If at some later stage that single combined facility needs to change in some way, then fundraising would be the only option available.

1.7 We need to ask what additional functionalities will we get from a combined facility and how much will we lose from the combination.

2. Activities and Use

2.1 If in future the requirement for our playing field or village hall facilities fades within Inkpen, then losing one of two small charities would still provide an opportunity for Inkpen to have a charitable identity that is sized to meet demand.

2.2 With two facilities, simultaneous bookings or uses do occur and are accommodated. A single facility would be restricted to dealing with one event at a time for most event types.

2.3 Two separate charities/buildings can provide a greater diversity of activities and more space for activities than a single combined building.

2.4 Should one of these buildings suffer damage, such as fire for example, then there is resilience in having two separate venues.

2.5 Some competition between the charities should stimulate them to do better as well as cooperate with each other, though it is important that cooperation does not give rise to complacency.

2.6 It is argued that a single combined venue could be designed to allow for a greater range of activities such as badminton basketball etc. But there is already excess capacity for many such sports in Kintbury, Hungerford or Newbury. Just as anyone wanting to use a gym or swim can go do so in Hungerford or Newbury, so anyone wishing to play Badminton for example, can already do so in Kintbury where there is existing excess capacity.

People choose where to go for the activities they want. Aiming to provide new activities where there is already abundant local capacity would increase the prospect of financial loss.

3. Financial

3.1 The cost of a single building based on similar exercises carried out in surrounding villages is typically around £500-£600K

3.2 The IMPFT fundraising account will not be available for a single building as the conditions for the funds relate to the existing improvement plans, and for no other. It has been made clear to us that this is the case.

3.3 Valuations of the Village Hall site, as a development site, range between £300k and £325k. The village would have to raise the difference between that and the full cost of a single combined site. This assumes that the Village hall is saleable and that residents have the appetite to raise the additional funds required. The current fund-raising committee have said that they will not take part in another fund raiser.

3.4 The Village Hall committee acknowledges that its income more than meets its expenditure and that it does this solely through charges for the use of the hall.

The IMPFT cannot cover all of its costs through user charges as it has to cover the cost of things that are free for residents to use (e.g. the children's play area). Because of these additional liabilities, the IMPFT has to raise the extra money through fundraising and by accessing grants. Neither charity is in financial difficulty or in deficit.

If the IMPFT were to raise charges to cover all of its costs so that additional fundraising was not needed, then it would make activities at the playing field site too expensive and deter activity with spiralling consequences.

3.5 Whilst the children's play area was originally financed through grants, its maintenance is not – grants are for capital projects, not maintenance. Similarly, the maintenance of the pavilion does not attract grant aid. To that end, the improvements to the pavilion seek to reduce running and maintenance costs over those for the current structure.

3.6 It looks likely that updating the current pavilion is doable with the fundraising that is underway.

4. Running Costs

4.1 For the IMPFT, the cost of repairs is primarily from outdoor activities – this cost element is not affected by planned works to the pavilion. Pavilion maintenance on the other hand, is largely related to individual user events. As an example, in cold weather heating is only on for events but is otherwise off, except in very cold weather. The running costs for the village hall are similarly event driven.

A larger combined facility would incur larger running costs. These costs are irrespective of group size, so small group events will cost the same as for large groups.

The combined insurance costs might be higher for the two separate facilities than for a single combined facility policy.

4.2 Marginal costs such as fire extinguisher maintenance and electrics certification will be much the same for a single combined facility as for the separate facilities.

4.3 Water and sewage costs are expected to be pretty much the same for both scenarios as these are event-based costs and the number of events would be the same, combined or otherwise.

4.4 Wear and tear cost might at first be lower for a new facility. Thereafter, significant maintenance bills for two separate facilities are unlikely to occur for both facilities simultaneously. Single significant maintenance bills for a single combined building would tend to be higher and occur without the benefit of any offset.

5. Facility Management

5.1 At present the facilities manage without a dedicated caretaker, relying on volunteers. A new facility would require a higher level of care-taking, with a greater frequency of attendance and a greater level of demand. This would inevitably be an add-on cost as the demands would become too onerous for voluntary support.

6. Benefits of the planned pavilion improvement

6.1 The changes to the pavilion that are planned do not involve any changes to the village hall. Any loss of facility whilst the pavilion is being improved would inevitably benefit the village hall through increased bookings, and disruption to users would be minimised.

6.2 The improved pavilion will be more energy efficient and more considerate of its surroundings. The renovated pavilion will be better insulated to keep it warmer in winter and cooler in summer without increasing energy consumption. A simple roof line can also facilitate solar panels should funding or grants permit at a later date.

Whilst it is an interesting idea, the option of a ground source heat pump is not an economic option for the pavilion. A ground source heat pump's annual maintenance cost would of itself greatly exceed the total running cost for the system currently chosen for the improved pavilion and in the longer term a ground source heat pump would become a cost burden to the IMPFT.

6.3 The play area and the woodland walk will help children to enjoy and become more aware of their environment, just as the adult sports that takes place at the playing field site will hopefully stimulate a similar awareness.

7. Conclusion

7.1 The overwhelming impression from this is that the two-venue solution that we already have, provides the best set of options for Inkpen's future.

7.2 Funding will always be an issue for such small charitable organisations as the IMPFT and Village Hall Trust. There is no "one size fits all" solution. It will require flexibility and effort on the part of both organisations, and cooperation without complacency in order for them to thrive.