

Charter Hall Update

March 2024

Introduction

A year ago we were extremely worried about our Hall's financial position. Covid, the increase in the cost of living and international turbulence had taken such a heavy toll on our finances, that we were concerned about how we would recover. This brief update, when comparing this year's situation with the previous two years, paints a far more promising picture. We are not yet where we need to be, but it now feels far more positive.

We would also like to take the opportunity to thank most sincerely the following: those individuals who have donated money, time and talent; our village clubs and societies with their continuing support for the Hall; all those who are using the Hall for a whole range of activities; and our own trustees, who have risen to the challenge as have Caroline, our Administrator, and Natalie, who keeps the Hall looking pristine.

This support from so many has meant a great deal and is very much appreciated. Thank you to all.

2023 Review

At the beginning of 2023 the Hall was taking stock of an extremely difficult financial position. We had not been exempt from the financial pressures brought on by a reduction in income, during and since the Covid pandemic, and by the cost of living pressures that came in its wake, which affected us all. We decided early in 2023 to map out a clear approach to overcome these financial difficulties, with a plan that is now well underway.

Early on in the year we shared these problems with the village and asked for support. The very generous response in donations has enabled us to install new water heaters, so that the main boiler now only provides heating. These measures, together with a change of gas supplier, are resulting in reduced fuel costs.

During the year, Hall lettings have increased and, as a result, Hall income has reached a level comparable to what it was pre-Covid.

Our annual review of charges is, as ever, a balancing act. Our revised letting fees for 2024 are now on our website. We believe they balance the Hall's need to recover from a very difficult financial position, with the recognition that we do need to keep charges at an affordable level for hirers. We are circulating a letter to all regular Hall users, detailing the thinking behind our new charges, with an explanation of the discounts available.

Overall we have achieved a much improved financial position, but there is still some way to go.

Looking ahead: 2024 and beyond

We made good progress in 2023, and the challenge is now to build on this for 2024 and beyond.

We expect the 2023 changes to our water heating system to deliver further savings in the year ahead, and we will be monitoring this carefully. We are also now able to control heating remotely, and thus to align heating times with individual bookings, instead of the previously automated system.

In terms of electricity costs, we have submitted a funding application to Ashford Borough Council to enable us to switch to LED lighting, and a decision on this will be made before the end of March. If grant funding is approved, we will change to LED lights in the Main Hall, thereby reducing running costs. Our aim is also to enhance the lighting on the stage, which will then open up opportunities for increased use of the stage area, for music, drama and other activities.

We would like to take a major step as soon as we can by installing solar panels. The capital cost is a challenge but government grants may be available to support community centres. If we are successful in securing this funding this will again reduce our running costs.

We will be increasing our focus during the year on marketing the Hall more effectively. We have looked at activities that the Hall could support and also at promoting increased take-up of existing use of the Hall. A first step down this route will be to sound out people in the village for their views on what they would like to see at the Hall. A survey will be carried out during the next few months.

The Big Bid !

This year, The Smarden Big Bid, a major fundraising event, is planned, with details now being widely publicised. Every few years the village has held a silent auction, which has had great success in raising money for Macmillan Cancer Support. We have no doubt that this year's silent auction, planned for September 7th, with music, food, drink and children's entertainment, will be hugely successful. We are delighted that this year's Big Bid will support both Macmillan and the Charter Hall. More detailed information will be circulated shortly, together with some thoughts on possible auction items which villagers may be able to submit. We hope that the response to the call for auction promises, and for sponsorship generally, will be widely supported.

Recruiting new Charter Hall trustees

Trustees are all volunteers, committed to ensuring that our Hall continues to play a central role in village life. It's a place for a whole range of village activities, for family and friends' parties and for meeting others in the village. The role of trustees is crucial to the Hall's continuing success. Two of our trustees, Lea Randolph and Gill Sadler, are standing down at the AGM in June, and they will be sorely missed. They have done a great job and helped steer the Hall through the last few difficult years.

Two new trustees will now be needed. This newsletter outlines our plans for the coming year, and new trustees will play a full role in helping to achieve these. Trustees do not need to have any particular specialisms. However, a common sense approach with a commitment to team working and providing a valuable service within the community, are essential. That said, we would very much welcome hearing from residents willing to play a leading role in Hall marketing, and those familiar with IT and social media. We would also welcome interest from residents who can help in any way in caring for our building, its services and its surrounds.

We have an information pack which describes the role of trustees in general terms. If you would like us to email you the information pack and perhaps discuss the role more fully, please contact:

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