

Towards a Parish Sports and Recreation Strategy: Making more and better use of Parish Council assets at Hopwood, Rowney Green and at The Wiggin

Note to Cllrs There are matters in this paper where highlighting suggests a Council decision is indicated and so leading to specific playing fields marketing material being compiled in this latter part of 2020

Introduction

Community action 5 from the Alvechurch Neighbourhood Plan commits the Parish Council to producing a sports and recreational strategy, a significant part of which is to consider the further development potential at the three sites where we have playing fields and related facilities.

Since the Summer of last year, we have been giving some attention to advancing work on the strategy. This has partly been prompted by the car parking concerns at Rowney Green and the loss of regular junior football there (and the associated income loss). The topic has also featured on the Agendas of the YSR Committee at its meetings since last September. More might have been achieved to advance thinking on the content of the strategy and particular essential and improvement requirements at our playing fields but factors like our staffing changes and the Corona virus lockdown have deflected attention in the first parts of 2020. However, and more recently, review of our APC budget situation (including the fixed costs associated with our buildings and playing fields and the relative lack of income from the hiring of these facilities),the potential availability of grant support from the BDC new homes bonus scheme, and the upcoming winter sports season together have helped to re-focus attention on the three playing fields. We do need to consider what should be done to improve the quality and to secure greater use of these with the potential gain in income from charges.

Our Chairman has given detailed attention to specifying both essential and desirable improvement works at the three playing fields. The overall estimated costs for these works will be available soon in itemised form. The APC funds available in this current budget year and projected forward will be insufficient to cover the likely cost to progress the essential and then the desirable improvement works. Taking forward this key aspect of the Council's strategy will mean earmarking some APC funds as part of budget setting and making successful application to various grants sources.

Seeking to increase Council income through the hiring of our facilities using an active marketing approach also needs to be part of this. Realistically and in the short to midterm, generating more income from the hire of our facilities is best seen as an off set to their running and maintenance costs. **Over time our ambition must be to secure more income through hire charges to get closer to a self-funding position with income achieved and necessary expenditure in a better balance.**

Improvements and Priorities

It is obvious that Hopwood Community Centre and playing field (HCC), Rowney Green Pavilion and playing field (RG) and the Wiggin Memorial playing field differ in terms of their existing facilities. As we assess their individual development potential at reasonable cost, APC should consider the promotion and charging approach for each.

In priority terms (initially based on the rules for the BDC new homes bonus grant) the Rowney Green playing field site comes first with attention to pitch drainage and on-site car parking works. These are the essentials ahead of possible improvements to the Pavilion building itself which will be subject to securing other grant support. Next is the Hopwood Community centre work to improve both pitch drainage and excess surface water on the car park.

The above RG and HCC work will draw on the APC current budget for the 20/21 financial year). It should be noted that the work mentioned at the two sites if undertaken in the August/November period could help to secure the take up of the facilities by either existing junior football team users or new sports teams recently approaching the Parish Council about the availability of playing fields for hire.

The Wiggin Memorial playing field takes third priority. The identified problem of run off from surrounding fields onto the Wiggin main football pitch can be addressed by the proposed clearance work on blocked ditches at key points on the edges of the Wiggin. This work is currently un-funded. When completed and a pitch is again available for play across the seasons, the lack of sufficient car parking and the complete absence of onsite changing facilities will still reduce its appeal so limiting the income generating potential of the Wiggin. However, see the concluding note below for some limited marketing scope.

Accordingly moving forward with an active marketing approach, our APC emphasis has to be on the Hopwood CC and the RG buildings with playing fields. The rest of this Paper now considers the marketing of these two assets.

Marketing the Hopwood Community Centre and Playing Fields

Assuming necessary work is undertaken to improve drainage and surface water issues soon at Hopwood, we should be able to secure agreements for weekend use by day by sports teams. Charges will be at the prevailing rates until at least until our new marketing strategy is agreed and in place, say from January 2021`. Starting afresh with the marketing of the Hopwood Centre and using a suggested framework we now consider the place, the provision offered, the price and its active promotion.

The place

Hopwood community centre is a single storey building to which is attached to a large playing field with options for different size football and other sports pitches and there is a recently re-equipped children's play area. This community centre lies very close to Junction 2 of the M42 and is just outside of the Birmingham city boundary, meaning that it is both easy to approach by car and is in a country location at a short distance from the city. The

country location feature is added to by virtue of its proximity to the Worcester/ Birmingham canal with various walking opportunities. In addition, and very close to the Centre is the Hopwood House pub with eating and drinking opportunities throughout the day and the evening.

In evaluating the above it is worth noting that compared with competitor halls in our area for example: the Alvechurch village hall, the Alvechurch cricket club, the Alvechurch Sports and Social club, the Ark at St Andrews Church , Rowney Green village hall, Hopwood village hall, it is the Hopwood community centre in a country location that has the greater combination of hall, playing fields, children's play equipment and large onsite car parking.

The provision

Hopwood Centre offers a recently refurbished main hall, which with windows opened can be light and airy, male and female toilet facilities, and cooking and limited catering facilities. It can provide for a variety of different user groups with its 85 chairs, 14 tables. It does not have by comparison with other places a fixed bar or installed sound and video equipment for training or entertaining purposes.

The price

As indicated in a previous note(attached) we need to consider moving from one fixed per session price for most users to a pricing system that reflects the hire period -day or evening, week day or weekend -and "type "of user – parish based/non parish based, club/society, small or large business , training or social activity.

A recent meeting of the APC F ad S committee agreed specifically to look at hire charges of the variable kind taking into account the charges prevailing in the local area. We should not be wary of fixing scale rates higher than our current charges as arguably, the fully equipped Hopwood Community Centre with its related facilities is quite special.

The promotion

The Hopwood Community Centre facility should be promoted using a mix of media to include our APC notice boards and website, the Facebook Groups that operate in our area and also in Bromsgrove, Redditch, and South Birmingham. We need to identify our target, user groups :in descending order most likely parish based clubs and societies, parish based sports teams, similar bodies to the above beyond our parish and businesses (subject to requirements that might need to be arranged like sound and video equipment and/or deliveries from external caterers and/or working arrangements with the pub to support ventures of this kind.)

Separately Hopwood CC could be promoted to organisers of social gatherings for hire in any weekend period when the facilities are available.

Following decisions on the above i.e. charging rates for the different user groups and the identification of those target users, a script needs to be developed for incorporation in on

line advertisements or for a limited run of leaflets. In both instances a suitable combination of facility description and illustrative photographs will be needed.

Marketing the Rowney Green playing field and pavilion.

The place

Whereas Hopwood community centre is properly described as fully equipped in terms of what the building itself offers for indoor purposes and in varying combinations with the children's play area and/or the pitches, the Rowney Green asset is essentially a playing field set up with a children's play area and tennis courts, and an attached sports pavilion. As a building arguably it is not to be seen as equivalent to village hall type premises. Its very close proximity to the Rowney Green village hall, one of the most superior hall buildings with adequate on-site car parking in the North Worcestershire area, is bound to impact on the choice of prospective users looking for a hall type venue. This fact of the village hall proximity must also be considered against pavilion projects potentially improving its heating, lighting and insulation where costs might be substantial and securing grant funding difficult. That said demand for sports facilities in North Worcestershire particularly directed to APC, following successful marketing of pitches better-drained and a car park now on site at Rowney Green, could mean convincing arguments for additional funding being put by APC to Sport England in particular. The emphasis on an under-used playing field being used much more fully is the aim of the its Community Asset Fund.

The provision

The RG site's large playing field area capable of supporting two football pitches and with potential for accommodating other sports utilising bat and ball, is where the marketing emphasis should lie. Viewing the pavilion as a club house for users of the playing field obviously means its unavailability when sport is being played usually at weekends, but the building could be used in weekday periods for sports clubs' indoor training/ social purposes.

We know from a current application to APC that the pavilion may also have a stand-alone use (unconnected with the sports field) for indoor personal fitness training purposes.

While seen as predominantly for outdoor purposes and with its building serving a lesser range of user possibilities (in comparison with the village hall nearby and what we offer at Hopwood CC) this is not to diminish the RG offer. Both for sports teams themselves, who may bring supporters to Rowney Green including families with children, and for other event organisers who enjoy the outdoors, the RG asset with its combination of tennis, children's play equipment and surrounding walks through the woods with outstanding views across the valley towards Alvechurch, has its own special qualities.

The price

The charging regime here will relate mainly to outdoor sporting purposes with differentials according to Parish/non-Parish club location and junior or adult team members. Seasonal hire charges would seem more appropriate rather than charging by the hour although the latter may be appropriate if a user group should want to use the pavilion only.

The promotion

The range of media previously mentioned for Hopwood could be used for the leaflets/on line material to be developed for Rowney Green. Additionally, whilst prioritising the marketing opportunity to Alvechurch FC junior teams and other sports teams in the Parish, APC should identify suitable lists of sport clubs in the North Worcestershire area to which promotional material about the RG asset might be sent by email.

The promotional literature could emphasise that the Parish Council is willing to discuss with sporting clubs the installation of different pitch arrangements or other facilities that would enable various new sports to be played on site at Rowney Green.

Concluding note

This paper has addressed the marketing opportunities that can be taken relating to Hopwood community centre and playing field and the Rowney Green playing field and pavilion with a view to new effort beginning from January 2021 when essential work is likely to have taken place at these two venues. The marketing of the Wiggin for sports purposes is seen on a later time scale because of the uncertainties about the funding of improved peripheral drainage and extending car parking there. Regular team sporting activities on an increased scale are less likely because of the absence of pavilion facilities for changing and toilet purposes. However, the scope for hiring the Wiggin for one-off sports type events or daytime holiday activity events for young people might be usefully explored and for which onsite temporary toilet facilities would be arranged.

In preparation for a suggested January 2021 marketing exercise the charging regime for the two assets according to daily, weekend or seasonal use and by type of user should be agreed and incorporated into a document that can be made readily available to those making enquiries.

A further part of our APC preparedness is to assess the on-line bookings management system that should be used. If we do achieve increased use of APC buildings and playing fields, additional cleaning and maintenance tasks are likely as well as some opening and closing of the facilities. This points up whether our village/facilities caretaker arrangements are robust or will need review to support the anticipated greater use of the assets.

Cllr J Cypher

29 June 2020