

## **OSMINGTON VILLAGE HALL**

### **MINUTES OF AN OPEN MEETING – HELD ON MONDAY JULY 22, 19.30 AT OVH**

#### **1 INTRODUCTION**

OVH chairman Vic White (VW) opened the meeting at 19.30 saying that the main purpose of the meeting was to deal with comments that were levelled at the trustees' running of the Village Hall by Christof Merkle on 13<sup>th</sup> May 2024.

##### **Chair's introduction**

Good evening and welcome.

We are here tonight to deal with the comments made by Christof Merkle, Chair of the Osmington Society, at the OPC AGM in May.

I must say it is normal and standard practice to speak to the Charity, society or group first if an issue arises. Why this didn't happen on this occasion is a mystery to a lot of Villagers, and it has caused a lot of bad feelings among some.

The Hall has always taken part in the Annual Parish Meeting – the last one having been held on Sunday 28th April – when all parishioners are welcome to attend. No problems were reported on that date to me.

Many changes have taken place since this lovely hall was opened in 2001, more than 23 years of operation. The building is well used by local groups and hardly a day goes by without some activity or event taking place.

Of course, there have been a few bumps in the road in the past 23 years but these have been dealt with by dedicated trustees. The COVID pandemic saw a huge fall in usage and loss of income. We also now contend with the cost-of-living crisis and increases in service costs and materials across the board. We have managed to keep price increases for hall users as low as possible, unlike other such facilities.

The last few years have been expensive and there's more expense to come. There was a design issue when the hall was built – concrete tiles were used on the roof, rather than slate, and the weight of the concrete caused roof-spread. The slant of the tiles has allowed water ingress and that's an ongoing problem to be dealt with. There is some subsidence at the back of the hall, also on the list to be dealt with.

New barriers have been installed, necessary for safety at the front of the building.

We have lost two Trustees recently – in part because of the recent unpleasant allegations made against the Trustees as a group. These vacancies have been published in the Oracle. 4 applications have been received and interviews are being arranged.

Under the previous Charity rules, the Trustees would have been liable for costs of £150,000 had the hall become bankrupt. This knowledge led to some of the Trustees resigning. The conversion to the current CIO removed that threat, but filling the vacancies proved to be difficult, although all village organisations and user groups were approached at that time.

The current board of Trustees work hard and I would like to thank them for their service.

**Vic White**

**Chairman, Osmington Village Hall Trustees Management Group**

## **2 PRESENTATION**

OVH trustee Jeff Little (JL) hosted a PowerPoint presentation addressing comments made by Christof Merkle (CM) at the Osmington Parish Council meeting on 13 May 2024

2.2 Addressing CM's concerns regarding the effectiveness of the OVH in achieving all of its stated objectives as a charity as well as "transparency of governance" JL listed the current trustees and noted that two had left but these vacancies were being filled.

2.3 JL referred to two particularly offensive comments made by CM

1. Reference to a 'magic handshake' required to become a Village Hall Trustee – later claimed to be an attempt at amusement, but not viewed as such by those it was aimed towards

2. Reference to a 'collective irresponsibility' on the part of the Village Hall Trustees.

Both of these comments are deeply resented by the OVH Trustees.

2.4 Referring to concerns about how the Trustees ensure the hall meets the needs of the community, JL said actions speak louder than words. He

highlighted the hall's current timetable showing that it is well used by local groups every day.

2.5 Responding to CM's query about how funds are being channelled back into the community, JL listed several OVH projects including:

- Solar panels which were installed by the charity Dorset Energy, which have both reduced costs and helped the hall's green credentials.
- The Kitchen was refurbished with help of a villager and Trustees, and OPC who paid for the cooker
- The Exchange Book Library added in the foyer, which was built by two trustees and stocked with donated books.
- The defibrillator outside the hall – adding that Bernie Kuflik is currently working to arrange CPR courses for interested parishioners
- New barriers in the car park, paid for by the Village Hall and erected by Trustees with help from a villager
- Floral decorations at entrance purchased by the hall and looked after by Trustees
- Wild flowers planted outside the hall (thanks to Trustee Jane Lock and husband Roger Lock)
- New overhead mounted projector and screen
- WiFi access.
- Licence for screening major national events such as the Coronation of HM King Charles III.
- CCTV has been installed to deter / monitor anti-social behaviour following incidents of drug dealing and vandalism in the Hall car park.
- Ability to take payments via credit / debit cards.
- Refurbishment of The Constable Room to include wide-screen TV.
- Wine-cooler donation
- Hostess trolley donation
- Replacement of all hall lighting with LED – carried out by friends of the Village Hall and adding to the hall's green credentials.

2.6 Dealing with CM's concerns about how the trustees are attracting new groups, JL said he was not aware of any new groups wishing to use the hall, but that there had been several community events arranged by the Village Hall Trustees including, for example, the annual lighting of the Christmas tree, Friday Pub Nights while the Sly Fox is closed as well as Coronation and Jubilee events and a very well-attended post-Lockdown party for the whole Parish.

2.7 Regarding concerns about how the trustees are sourced and that it lacked representation, JL pointed out that the user groups had been approached but nobody wanted to join the trustees. He pointed out that the Trustees give their time freely.

2.8 Accusations that OVH had a 'confusion of purpose' and that it was being operated for its own interest rather than for the benefit of the community, leading to increasing commercialism as opposed to community benefit. The accusations were countered by VW and JL. The former pointed out that of 178 invoices issued in 2023, 90% have been for Parish use. This year to date, 92 invoices have been issued with 96% being for Parish use. He added that the hall needs commercial activities to remain afloat but that these activities had, in fact, decreased in number. JL said the number of weddings had actually gone down over the past two years, and that there was no confusion of purpose. JL said that the OVH was an enabler as much as a provider and that there was great scope for other groups to organise events, also on a joint, coordinated basis.

2.9 Community objectives - JL said that the aims laid out in the 2011 Community Plan for Osmington had been well met. The Youth Club had been set up and flourished until it had ended due to lack of village youngsters.

He also pointed to the Lunch Club, Pub Nights, lectures and celebrations of national events held at the hall.

2.10 Responding to questions regarding the necessity for the Parish Council paying to use OVH, JL said that was the policy for all users to pay following a complaint from a local resident to the Charity Commission. JL said he had compared costs and practices with other halls, saying OVH is competitive with other local halls.

EB said that CM had voiced this question via an e-mail in November 2023 and had accepted the explanation, as described above, at that time.

2.11 JL said that the OVH is evolving to meet the needs of the community with plans to construct a patio to the rear of the hall with disabled access, the trustees aim to improve the acoustics of the main hall, to procure a new storage shed to be delivered in August 2024 and added that additional chairs had already been purchased.

2.12 Accounts: JL said the OVH had made a small operating loss last year and would have done so the previous year as well had it not been for a generous donation from Mary Kempe. He said it takes £16,000 per annum simply to satisfy the basic fixed costs for the hall. This is particularly challenging during the cost-of-living crisis and inflationary pressure and thus some external events are essential if charges are not to rise for the regular user groups. He paid tribute to the Bookings Officer saying handling it all – and helping to run the hall – is a seven-day-a-week operation for all the Trustees. He added that if the Trustees are at fault at all, then it is for not blowing their own trumpet loudly enough and in future they would be more proactive in making use of The Oracle and social media to improve transparency.

### 3 TESTIMONIAL EMAILS

Four unsolicited emails had been received supporting the OVH following the announcement of the meeting and the reason for which it had been called. Two of these were read out by Trustees Jane Lock and Eileen Bramley.

### 4 QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

4.1 Vaughan Howell wanted to know what CM was complaining about CM said he was trying to raise an issue and be helpful. He said there had been an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with regard to what's going on at the OVH. Vaughan Howell implied strongly that this was not the case.

CM repeated his claim that nobody knew who the trustees were, and that there had been no calls for new ones since 2018.

JL and VW said there have been no vacancies and hence no new appointees since the exodus prior to the new CIO being implemented.

CM said there had been at least three community meetings (the National Park plan, Traffic and the Sly Fox), and asked why there should be a cost for community meetings.

VW replied that if there was to be no charge for the use of the hall for meetings of this type, then the hire cost would have to increase for the regular user groups.

4.2 CM queried why the OVH did not charge Phoenix Fundraisers for the use of the hall as a Tea Room during the fete. VW replied that it was the decision of the Trustees to make a donation to the Fete. He said any trustees who were also members of fete organisers Phoenix Fundraisers left the room when the issue was discussed. Juliet Merkle (JM) said that allowing the donation to the Fete was unfair, and possibly other groups should get their request to have the hall for free discussed by the Trustees.

VW said that going forward, nobody will have the use of the hall without charge (later adding that it would only be free for the wakes of parishioners). CM claimed the hall is there for the community. JL pointed out that the very survival of the hall would be under threat if there was no charge for community events.

Sue Maggs (SM) said she had lived in the village since 1959 and hadn't heard such rubbish as was being spoken by the Village Hall detractors. She said that nothing is free in this world and that all costs are going up, adding that if someone gets something for free, then ultimately someone else has to pay for it.

Sally Little (SL) also replied to CM saying that community events must be paid for as there's a cost for every event – lighting, heating etc.

Joe Medrecki (Joe M) congratulated the Trustees on a fantastic presentation and agreed there was an undercurrent of nastiness, but added the community needs to unite and come together. He said he spoke to VW at the Annual Parish Meeting of Electors [where groups are invited to showcase their activities and answer questions] but did not see the information that had been revealed this evening. EB said it was there if anyone had asked. Joe M asked CM would he have made his comments if he had seen the presentation, etc.? VW said that nobody had asked any questions whatsoever at the Annual Parish Meeting, adding that CM was present, did not view the OVH stand and asked no questions at that time. This would have been the ideal opportunity to address these issues.

Hilary Ballard said that she understood that the point of the Annual Parish Meeting was to showcase groups not to ask questions.

Trustee Theresa Hardy (TH) said that when she heard what CM had said she was fuming and she demanded an apology. She said people don't realise just how much the Trustees do for the community via the hall including maintenance.

Diane Keeling said she had lived in the village four years and could not fault anything that goes on at the OVH. She did not think there was anything to complain about.

Mark Johnson (MJ) agreed with Joe M with regard to the community coming together. He had heard about tensions in the village but was told it wasn't the case although he could feel tension even now in the room. He said progress would not be made with entrenched views, so the community needs to look at its strengths and come together. He acknowledged that CM perceived a rumbling discontent under the surface and wanted to 'lance the boil'.

MJ commended the calm and sensible presentation, which addressed all the issues and asked what the Trustees would do going forward.

Christine Codd (CG) quoted Section 6 of the CIO and said Phoenix Fundraisers had had the hall at no charge, therefore other groups should have it for free. She complimented the Trustees for their work.

EB said that the OVH donated money towards the Tea Room for the Fete because Phoenix was raising money for charity with the Fete fundraiser, with 50% going to St Osmund's church. She said that there had been an attempt to get all the local groups on board to help run the 2023 Fete and that all had come on board to put on an extremely successful event, apart from The Osmington Society.

Sandra Miller (SM) said she was in no doubt OVH is run efficiently and as a trustee for another group she knows how hard they work. She said the presentation had been positive and residents could see clearly what has been achieved.

Addressing MJ's question, JL said what's coming out are issues about visibility and transparency and that these will be addressed. He referred to a similar situation some years ago when he was involved with the Osmington Society and that a letter had been written to the VH Chairman. The matter has been duly resolved by the VH in a calm and sensible way. He said that, had CM chosen to request to attend a meeting of the trustees to discuss his

perceptions, then the situation in this case would have been resolved in an orderly manner.

CM claimed it was not about groups and his objective was to simply have a meeting. EB replied he could have simply asked for a meeting. He said he did not address his issues to any one person. EB requested an apology.

Geoff Codd (GC) said it had been a useful meeting and congratulated the organisers. As a former OsSoc Chairperson he objected to the insults towards the group. He said there were different parties with different interests who had worked hard. He said CM had made his comments with good intentions. He called for regular discourse and said someone needs to take the lead.

SL said there were too many groups. She suggested a possible outcome would be for two representatives from each group to meet on a regular basis to discuss and resolve any issues.

Laura Davis (LD) thanked VW and EB for all they do for the village and commended them and the OVH Trustees for their hard work. She advised everyone to consider their language before speaking, saying that words can be painful.

Diane Moore agreed with SL about groups meeting. She commented about an issue with the OVH calendar and the auctions. She began to criticise EB but was shut down by many of those who attended at the meeting.

SM made a plea not to use telegraph poles to advertise events but to use notice boards. She noted the OsSoc notice board in Village Street was in a poor state of repair.

MEETING CLOSED.