

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C/106/2005-06.
Date of meeting: 6 February 2006.



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Housing.

Subject: Bansons (WRVS) Hall, Bansons Way, Chipping Ongar.

Officer contact for further information: Alan Hall (01992 – 56 4004).

Democratic Services Officer: Adrian Hendry (01992 – 56 4246).

Recommendations:

That a Full Repairing and Insuring Lease for Bansons (WRVS) Hall, Bansons Way Ongar, and associated land be granted to Ongar Town Council for a period of 50 years at a peppercorn rent, for the Town Council's use as a Town Council Office and community meeting facility, subject to all other terms being agreed, and to:

(a) No costs being incurred by the Council, including the Town Council meeting the Council's reasonable legal fees and all costs of the required structural alterations;

(b) The Town Council using its best endeavours to continue to accommodate both existing users and new community groups, either at Bansons Hall or its Love Lane offices;

(c) Provision being made that gives the Council a legal charge over the Town Council's existing property at Love Lane, Ongar whereby, in the event of the Town Council transferring the freehold ownership, or granting a lease for other than community use, to another party, the Town Council would pay the Council an amount equivalent to the lowest of:

(i) the difference between the value of the Love Lane premises in respect of its current use and the value of the premises in respect of the proposed use; and

(ii) the open market value of the lease for Bansons Hall;

with all valuations being based on a date no earlier than three months prior to the date of the transfer or lease of the Love Lane premises; and

(d) That the Town Council will obtain all required planning permission for Bansons Hall.

Background:

1. Bansons Hall, sometimes known as the WRVS Hall, Bansons Way, Ongar is held with the Housing Revenue Account under Housing Act powers, is in reasonable condition (brick built) and comprises:

- Meeting/Common Room;

- Large “industrial” kitchen;
 - Office;
 - Toilets; and
 - Limited car parking.
2. Up until a number of years ago, the Council and WRVS operated the Meals Service from the kitchen at Basons Hall. However, since the Council lost the contract, the kitchen and therefore the hall, is hardly used. The current usage is understood to be as follows:
 - Baby Clinic and nurses meeting (temporary arrangement – Tuesday mornings and Thursdays);
 - 10k (youth) organisation (temporary arrangement – Tuesday evenings);
 - WRVS Luncheon Club (11am – 3pm Wednesdays);
 - Circle Dancing (Thursday evening); and
 - WRVS use of office (Friday).
 3. The Council is responsible for the repair and maintenance of the building as well as the costs of gas, electricity and water rates. These running costs generally amount to around £1,500 per annum. The Council does not undertake any cleaning.
 4. Due to the lack of usage, the Head of Housing Services has, for some time, been trying to find an alternative / increased use for the hall. The Head of Planning & Economic Development has advised that the site is not suitable for residential development, although a small extension to the neighbouring sheltered housing scheme, Frank Bretton House, may be acceptable. However, the demand for sheltered housing in the district is low, with the Council already experiencing difficulty letting many sheltered flats, and when they are let, they tend to be to people with low housing priority, often from outside the District.
 5. Consequently, the Head of Housing Services and a Valuer and Estates Surveyor have been meeting and corresponding with Ongar Town Council over two potential options. Either;
 - (a) Ongar Town Council taking over, or managing, the hall to hire for community groups (since it is felt that they are better placed to undertake lettings than the District Council) – However, the Parish Council has said that there is somewhat of an abundance of community halls in Ongar, and there may not be the demand; or
 - (b) Ongar Town Council taking over occupation of the hall to use either temporarily or permanently as a Parish Office.
 6. Ongar Town Council has recently undertaken a feasibility study of the options for the future provision of a Town Council Office and meeting room, since its existing accommodation at Love Lane, Ongar is in a very poor condition. Following a recent meeting between the Head of Housing Services and the Town Council, the Town Council has discussed its options and is very keen to take over occupation of Basons Hall (and the associated garden and parking areas) on a long term basis, to provide them with office facilities, a Council Chamber and meeting room, which could also be hired out to local community groups, as a replacement for its Love Lane offices.
 7. A copy of the Town Council’s letter setting out its position is attached. As can be seen, the main aspects of their request are:
 - The freehold or leasehold transfer at a discounted cost or peppercorn rent;

- The Town Council would meet the costs of the required structural alterations (which they are assessing);
 - The Town Council would be responsible for management and maintenance (although this is not referred to in the letter, it was made clear by the Head of Housing Services, and accepted by the Town Council at meetings);
 - The Town Council would endeavour to continue to accommodate existing users at either Bansons Hall or Love Lane;
 - The Town Council will seek to give other community groups access to the hall; and
 - The Town Council would not make any financial gain out of any redevelopment or future use of Love Lane (and if they did, although not referred to in the letter, the Head of Housing Services has made it clear that it would be part of the terms of any transfer that the District Council would benefit, or share in the benefit).
8. The Head of Planning and Economic Development has been consulted and has confirmed that, in principle, a change of use to a Town Council Office and meeting room would be acceptable in planning terms. All Heads of Service have been asked to consider whether or not Bansons Hall, its site, or the accommodation at Love Lane (should the Town Council transfer) could be used by their service. However, no alternative uses have been identified.
9. It is suggested that a transfer to Ongar Town Council to meet their needs would be a good way forward for all parties, and is in the spirit of partnership working with local councils advocated by the Local Charter between the Council and local councils. The provision of a long lease would be preferable to a freehold transfer, since it would allow more easily enforceable controls.
10. However, the main issue is whether the transfer should be at full market value, discounted cost, or free. The Town Council's position appears to be that they could not afford full market value. This issue has been considered by the Council's Management Board, which recommends that the Council should grant a lease to the Town Council, for a term of 50 years, at a peppercorn rent (i.e. free), subject to all other terms being agreed. In making this recommendation, the Management Board has had regard to the fact that a number of similar leases by the Council to parish and town councils in the past have been on a concessionary basis. The Head of Legal, Administration and Estates has assessed the open market value of the lease for the proposed use, for 50 years on Full Repairing and Insuring (FRI) Terms, at £92,000.
11. Although the detailed terms of the lease would be negotiated by the Head of Legal, Administration and Estates, the proposed heads of terms of the lease are set out at the commencement of the report, which have been agreed by the Town Council.

Statement in support of recommended action:

12. The hall is under-used at present and costs the District Council money to maintain. The Town Council is seeking an alternative location for its Town Council Office and considers that Bansons Hall could provide a suitable alternative. The Council has adopted a Local Charter with local councils, with an intention of working together to meet the needs of residents. A number of similar leases to parish and town councils in the past have been on a concessionary basis.

Other options for action:

13. The other options that have been considered and rejected are:
- (a) To transfer the freehold of the hall, instead of the leasehold;

- (b) To seek different heads of terms, notably the payment of rent;
- (c) To maintain the status quo; or
- (d) To seek to develop the site as an extension to the sheltered housing scheme at Frank Bretton House.

Consultation undertaken:

14. The Town Council has been consulted, as set out in the report.

Resource implications:

Budget provision: Small annual saving on running costs.

Personnel: Nil.

Land: Provision of lease for a term of 50 years at a peppercorn rent.

Community Plan/BVPP reference: N/A.

Relevant statutory powers: Housing Act 1985.

Background papers: Valuation by the Head of Legal, Administration and Estates.

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications: Nil.

Key Decision Reference (if required): N/A.

Ongar

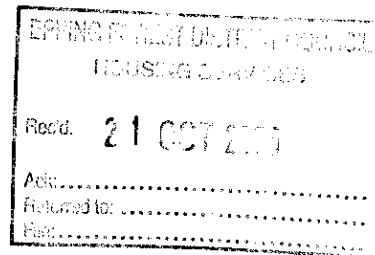
Parish Council



Julie Abel
Clerk to the Council

Mr Alan Hall
Head of Housing Services
Epping Forest District Council
Civic Offices
High Street
Epping
Essex CM16 4BZ

20th October 2005



Dear Alan,

Banson's Hall, Ongar

The Council is grateful to you and your colleague, Peter Steer, for attending the meeting at Banson's Hall on 8th September 2005. It was felt by those members present that the meeting was extremely positive.

To summarise the Council's position; it has now been at the Love Lane site for some years but recognises that its building falls short of meeting an employer's requirements in terms of provision for its employees. The existing OPC building does not comply with health and safety or DDA standards and significant sums of money would need to be spent to rectify this. In addition, the Council does not have sufficient space to accommodate more than a handful of members of the public at meetings and has no opportunity to extend office space to accommodate additional staff.

The Council has investigated the ways in which it could improve its facilities including refurbishment and extension of its existing building, a completely new build on its own land and a larger project enabling the provision of a new sports and social club building incorporating office space for the Council. After an in depth examination of all the options, the Council is faced with the problem of considerable costs beyond that which it could raise by way of loans or would be acceptable increases to the precept.

During this process you approached the Parish Council enquiring if it would consider Banson's Hall being transferred to OPC and/or taking over its management.

Having considered all the options OPC is of the opinion that the best way forward would be to ask EFDC if it would agree to Banson's Hall and the adjoining garden and car park be transferred to OPC's ownership to enable this Council to meet its needs for improved facilities which would benefit the service it provides to local residents.

Ongar Parish Council has adopted the 'Spirit of Best Value' – Challenge, Compare, Consult, Competition & Collaboration.

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Ongar

Parish Council



Julie Abel
Clerk to the Council

OPC sees this as a long-term solution to its difficulties and feels that if the District Council can look favourably on this request to agree a transfer at a discounted cost or on a long-term peppercorn leasehold then its needs could be met within the limited budget which is available to the Parish Council.

At the meeting with yourself and Peter Steer it was agreed that OPC would commission a structural survey. It has already authorized this as well as employing an architect to assess the building and make recommendations for internal alterations, in particular to bring the building up to DDA requirements.

OPC accepts that it would fund any internal alterations needed to meet its requirements.

This Council would respect and use its best endeavours to ensure that existing users would continue to be accommodated either at Basons Hall or in the existing OPC Council Chamber. It is the Council's wish to maximise community use of both buildings and it gives the assurance that it seeks to encourage more community usage of Basons Hall and the existing OPC building which would then be available.

The only land which OPC owns is that used by and leased to the Ongar and District Sports and Social Club and the adjoining Recreation Ground. The Council gives the firm assurance that it would not seek to sell or allow speculative development of any of the land which it owns or make any financial gain from acquiring Basons Hall.

This Council looks forward to working in partnership with EFDC to achieve the above aims and aspirations in the best interests of the local community.

Yours sincerely

Mrs J. Abel

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