

The Liberal Democrat Plan for Clair Hall

September 2021

Summary

This paper is a submission to the public consultation being carried out by Mid Sussex District Council (MSDC) on the future of Clair Hall. It sets out the Liberal Democrat proposal for the future of the Hall.

Liberal Democrats believe that Clair Hall is a vital community asset for Haywards Heath and that there is a clear need for a facility like Clair Hall now and in the foreseeable future.

We rule out the idea of dissipating service provision across a number of halls and sites. It would be unsuitable for the needs of the town.

We support the idea of creating a modern community facility which would provide the same or better facilities as Clair Hall but it would take a number of years to plan, finance, build and bring into service.

We therefore propose a two stage plan to meet the need for a community venue in Haywards Heath now and into the future:

1. Reopen Clair Hall.

MSDC must start immediately – before the NHS hands the Hall back - to evaluate what needs to be done to reopen it and to decide how it can be managed and operated until a modern replacement is provided.

then

2. Plan for and provide a modern community facility, on a regenerated Clair Hall site or similar, to which services can be transferred.

MSDC should set up a community Working Group to draw up a practical and affordable scheme which would meet the future needs of the community.

Background

Liberal Democrats believe that Clair Hall is a vital community asset where the people of Haywards Heath and the surrounding area can meet, learn, be creative and be entertained.

In September 2020 the Conservative Cabinet of MSDC decided that Clair Hall should be permanently closed. It also decided to terminate the lease to the Scouts of the Redwood Centre, which is on the Clair Hall site.

Liberal Democrats vigorously opposed the closure in Council on the grounds that:

- the evidence on which the decision was made was flawed
- no alternatives to closure were considered
- the decision was unlawful because the public had not been consulted beforehand.

Liberal Democrat councillors demanded that the decision be examined at a special Scrutiny Committee meeting but the Conservative councillors at the meeting voted to confirm the decision.

In December a member of the public asked the High Court for a judicial review of the closure decision. The result was that in January 2021, after spending at least £27,000 in legal fees, the Council caved in. It agreed to nullify its closure decision and to conduct a six month public consultation exercise before considering closure again.

Meanwhile, at the end of 2020, when a vaccination centre was urgently required and the Council was unable to find any other venue in the district which was suitable, Clair Hall was temporarily reopened, to be available to the NHS for as long as was needed.

The public consultation exercise is now under way and this paper sets out the Liberal Democrat proposal for the future of the Hall.

The need for a Community Venue in Haywards Heath

There is clearly demand in Haywards Heath for a community venue which provides a full range of facilities like Clair Hall. The huge public reaction to the closure decision alone has made that clear. Thousands of people signed petitions, groups that used the hall got together to express their dismay and a community proposal to take over the running of the Hall was mounted. This sort of reaction would not have happened without a widespread belief that Clair Hall fills an important community need.

There was an increase in the usage of the Hall in the two years before the pandemic. Council data released after the closure decision was made, and after pressure from Liberal Democrats, shows an increase in footfall and room usage and reveals that the report presented to Cabinet at the decision-making meeting, which stated that footfall "...has steadily declined over the last four years", was seriously misleading.

The assertion that other spaces in the town can provide adequate alternatives to Clair Hall has been proved to be wrong. For example, when asked to do so Haywards Heath Town Council (HHTC) was unable to find an alternative which met the needs of the NHS Blood Donation Service; the Weald Theatre Group found that alternative theatre space is not available at the times they would need it for their annual pantomime and MSDC itself was unable to find an adequate space, other than Clair Hall, to provide a Covid vaccination centre.

What's more, the demand is likely to increase as the population of Haywards Heath and the surrounding area grows. In addition, with more people working from home, there will be increased demand for evening leisure activities and daytime meeting spaces when the pandemic subsides.

There is clear current demand for a multi-purpose building to cater for the arts, entertainment, and general community use such as meetings, exercise, dance etc. Additionally, a facility like Clair Hall adds considerably to the wellbeing of the community. It is a place where residents can meet, learn, be creative and be entertained. It enhances peoples' lives, helps bind the community together and adds to the value of living in Haywards Heath.

The plan for meeting the need

Liberal Democrats rule out the idea of dissipating service provision across a number of halls and sites that are unlikely to be suitable for the needs of the town or provide an integrated community service.

It would take a number of years to plan, finance, build and bring into service a modern community venue which could provide the same or better facilities as Clair Hall.

Therefore, there has to be a two stage plan to meet the need for a community venue in Haywards Heath now and into the future:

1. Reopen Clair Hall until a modern replacement is provided; then
2. Plan for and provide a modern community facility, on a regenerated Clair Hall site or similar, to which services can be transferred.

Stage 1: Reopen Clair Hall until a modern replacement is provided

As discussed earlier, it will take a considerable time for an alternative venue to come to fruition. Closing Clair Hall for a period of years would create a void in community provision and potentially reduce demand for a new venue adding risk to its viability.

In the meantime there is a need for community facilities which could be met by Clair Hall if it can be reopened.

The management and operation of Clair Hall was outsourced in the period before it was closed, under a contract which was cancelled by MSDC. Consequently, before the Hall can be reopened, a new management arrangement needs to be put in place.

We therefore propose that MSDC immediately, and before the NHS leaves Clair Hall, requests Council staff to examine what would need to be done to bring the Hall back into use and report on:

- The cost of bringing the Hall back into use so that it would be able to provide the same range of services that it did before it was closed. This would cover:
 - The cost of repairs and refitting which would be necessary immediately
 - The cost of the running and repairing the building over the next three years
- Recommend how and by whom (for example MSDC, HHTC, an outsourcer or a community group) the Hall could be managed and operated over a three year period in the most effective manner.
- Determine how the costs can be met. We understand that there are £187K of Section 106 funds specifically earmarked for the maintenance of Clair Hall which could be available to cover some of these costs.
- Determine the terms under which the Redwood Centre could continue to be let to the Scouts.

Stage 2: Plan for and provide a modern community facility

A proper scheme needs to be drawn up for the building of a new venue which would meet Haywards Heath and the surrounding area's current and forecast needs and, most importantly, would be affordable. For it to be successful there needs to be confidence that, over the long run, the facilities would be used and that the community would bear the cost of use. To arrive at that scheme we propose the following:

- MSDC set up a Working Group to draw up the scheme. The group would include councillors from MSDC and Haywards Heath Town Council (HHTC) and representatives of interested community parties and would be able to call on external expertise. The group would then:
 - Take on board the findings of the current public consultation exercise.
 - Commission external market consultants to carry out a Market Study to discover what the market will bear i.e. the facilities for which there would be demand in the community, the extent of the use of the facilities and the cost of using the facilities which users would be willing to bear.
 - Commission consultants to work up an indicative operational budget would help to determine what size of venue can be supported.
 - Examine where the venue would be located and whether it would be associated with another development.
 - Examine whether there is scope for grants or subsidy to support the building and operational costs of the venue. Venues of this nature nearly always rely on subsidy or grants/donations to be viable (for example, Chequer Mead receives £75k p.a. from East Grinstead Town Council and the Capitol in Horsham is subsidised to the tune of £250k p.a).
 - Propose how and by whom the venue should be managed and operated.
 - Present the scheme in a form that could be carried forward by MSDC.

Haywards Heath Liberal Democrats

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