**Statement from Buxted Parish Council Clerks Regarding the Refurbishment/Redevelopment of The Reading Room**

Buxted Parish Council has a policy of councillors not responding to social media posts (unless factual information), however as Proper Officer and Responsible Financial Officer of Buxted Parish Council, Claudine and I as clerks have felt that some recent posts have brought into question our integrity of running the council and its finances, therefore it is important for us to provide as much accurate information to parishioners as possible, in this case in relation to the status and historical facts regarding the Reading Room.

**Redevelopment of the Reading Room in Association with a New Hall**

In 2006 parishioners gave a clear steer to the Parish Council via the Parish Plan that a new hall was desired in the village of Buxted. The Parish Plan gave leverage to the Parish Council to request funds towards a new hall from the redevelopment of the Grampian site, Five Ash Down (which is now Ashdown Place). The new hall would be situated on the Ionides Trust site and be fit for purpose for all types of user groups, surrounded by open green space with full disabled access. Funds were secured from the developer of £108,000 which were tied by legal agreement to be spent on or associated with building a new hall for Buxted. As part of this project, the Parish Council agree to support a community led project wherever possible, which included eventually selling the Reading Room for redevelopment to provide funds for the new hall. To this end and when it seemed that the new hall would be going ahead the Parish Council secured planning permission for semi-detached houses on the site of the Reading Room in preparation for when the funds were needed.

**What Changed? Why Then Refurbish the Reading Room?**

The new hall was always a community led project, supported by the Parish Council, but sadly a number of circumstances eventually led to the Buxted Community Hall Trust folding in 2019. By this stage, the footings for the new hall had been completed which means the project could still be taken forward at any future time. At this point the Parish Council were left with a situation where they could either take up the hall project or look to refurbish the existing Reading Room. As enthusiasm and drive for a new hall (or at least the one which had permission) had dissipated, the Parish Council decided to refurbish the Reading Room. A survey was sent to each user group and every household in the village and advertised online. This questionnaire asked for what improvements/changes could be made; however, it did not give the option of the closing the hall as this was never the intention. We received a very small response of 3% which mostly highlighted the improvements which were already thought to be necessary.

Once a decision was made, it was always the intention of the Parish Council to refurbish the Reading Room, and this is reflected in the working party notes from 2019 to the beginning of this year. Professional advice was sought, and fire and electrical wiring surveys were undertaken, highlighting some serious issues. It was only when the surveyor provided total estimated costs of £200,000 for works, that a refurbishment was brought into question. The Parish Council initially budgeted £50,000 of public money towards the project, with a total possible spend of up to £100,000. However, when the estimate of £200,000 was provided this presented the Parish Council with a very difficult decision, given that it does not have this much money to spend.

**Parish Council funds are public money, and the Parish Council has a responsibility to provide best possible value for that money. Can the Parish Council therefore justifiably spend parishioners’ money (or money raised by grants if available) on a village hall that is grossly underused and even if modernised and would always have a limited usage due to its design, layout, and lack of parking?**

**Current Usage of the Reading Room**

In the last ‘normal’ year, 2019, the regular user groups were the daytime Art Club (once a week), Evening Art Club (once a week), W.I. (once a month), Horticultural Society approx. 6 times per year and Buxted Players (2 weeks, 2 times per year in addition to rehearsal times). There were four other ad hoc hires of the hall that year. Two groups use the Reading Room free of charge, this is a long-standing arrangement. All of this is very different to the thriving hall in Five Ash down and a well utilised hall in High Hurstwood.

Costs for the Reading Room for financial year 2018-19 were £3,693 revenue and £6,159 expenditure

Yes, the hall is a community asset and is heavily subsidised by the Parish Council, but is this enough usage to warrant a £200k spend on the hall without a guaranteed increased income?

**The Parish Council has knowingly allowed the Reading Room to get into a state of disrepair?**

This is untrue, the Parish Council has continued to maintain and repair the hall, when necessary, which has included a new heating system, various roof repairs and very recently the installation of a telephone and internet line. What it has not done however is to replace the entire wiring system or replace the roof and windows with all up to date requirements at a large expense when it was the intention to demolish to hall to provide capital funds for the new facility.

The estimated costs of £200,000 now include all the above in addition to the requirements for the fire regulations and installation of a new kitchen and toilets (all of which can be viewed on the agenda details for the 10 August 2021 parish council meeting)

**What Happens Next?**

Armed with the knowledge from the surveys, the Parish Council remains very uneasy to continue to use the hall in the long term until further advice has been received from our insurers which is the position, we are currently in. The safety of the hall users is paramount which in part explains why the estimated costs are so high. It is also important to note that that those volunteer Cllrs would be personally liable should something happen and we were considered deemed not to have taken action to prevent it following the receipt of the surveys. At the current time and until clarification is sought from the insurance company the hall will not be available for hire.

As mentioned above, Parish Council money is public money, your money, and councillors are unpaid, volunteer custodians of these funds with a responsibility of spending where necessary and for best value.

Finally, I would comment that all parish council finances are audited both internally (by an internal auditor outside of the parish council) and externally by a government appointed auditor and are also available to any member of the public on request.