

The Nursery Booking – Issues considered by the committee

The proposition received in late August was whether to accept a booking by the Nursery of the large hall 5 days a week 9-3 (9-12 on Tuesday). There was some time pressure as The Nursery needed to move by November 1st.

1. Who are the Village Nursery.

This has been running for 25 years and is now owned by Jo Baker, a former teacher. They have been based at the Church Hall in Clanfield (and have just changed their name to reflect the move). They have a good reputation and have just been rated Good by OFSTED. The schools headmaster Amy O'Toole knows, likes and respects Jo Baker.

2. How many East Meon children would benefit?

7 East Meon children were using the Nursery (as at September). This can be expected to rise as local parents (especially those with no transport) now have the option. Jo Baker reports the other families are a mix, including Clanfield, Petersfield, and Lovedean. We have included in the Nursery contract an obligation to focus on recruiting more local families.

3. What was the value to the community of the booking?

Pre-school education is very valuable for any child and some in East Meon could not access it without this move. We had positive supporting written messages from 8 village parents regarding the move – and no negative statements. A long and clear message from school governor and village parent Anna Tebbutt underlined the value to children and the school of a village nursery, especially for families that don't have transport.

4. What was the effect on the school?

The head of the school made her support very clear and confirmed that the Hall use would not create any issues for them. We were told by a governor that without new pupil intake the viability of the school is at risk as it has fewer than 80 pupils. The Nursery has been a significant feeder to the school over the years (18 children since 2017), and Jo Baker and school head Amy O'Toole know each other well.

5. Would this disturb current hall bookers?

We knew there would be, inevitably, some disturbance. Classes booked for Nursey hours in the Large Hall would need to move to the Small Hall, or to a time after 3pm, or to the Church Hall (which the PCC has subsequently made available, as the new vicar is now using the Hall as a base)). Some groups are taking the alternative offerings.

Evening and weekend users are not affected (Nursery is 9-3pm). The Café are very happy with the arrangement – which will likely bring them extra business (Diana Probyn is on the committee). Work has been done to keep Nursery and Little Steps equipment separate (new locked drawers under the stage and in the kitchen).

6. Would this disturb potential other users?

It clearly might but as the Hall is rarely used in the week on an ad hoc bases so we cannot say who these might be. We can vary the Nursery hours if necessary if, for example, a major wake or other event (such as elections) required us to do so.

7. What was the potential extra traffic?

We expect there to a small net increase in traffic. In September the Nursery served seven East Meon children - who no longer need to be driven to Clanfield. There is understood to be considerable overlap (c50%) between Clanfield and East Meon children in the East Meon school. Given siblings (school and Nursery) will likely travel together, and the fact East Meon families won't have to drive. Nursery staff will bring four cars.

8. What about noise from the Nursey?

We are wary of the potential for noise issues for both Small Hall users and local residents and have added a requirement that The Nursery minimise noise in their contract. We can enforce that if there are issues.

9. Toilets

Safeguarding rules mean we need to allocate the Nursery exclusive use of a toilet during Nursery hours. Allocating the ladies made most sense (it has more cubicles), so we are currently asking females visitors to use the disabled loo, other than at weekends and on busy evening events, when we will open the ladies (given the sanitising / cleaning costs its cheaper to do it this way). Butser Home Start and the Café were consulted and accept the change. They have reported no problems since this was implemented at the end of September (early, to familiarise users with the new routine). Appropriate additional sanitising material has been provided and notices explaining the change have (recently) been posted.

10. Who was consulted?

EMPC were informed, as was the school, the vicar, current hirers, the committee and their informal contacts, and a number of local parents. Committee members Andrew Hughes and David Pepper separately met with Sue and John Croft, who had expressed concerns, and shared details of the plan with them. We have consulted the 5 groups that had booked the large hall in the relevant hours. No group leader has objected to the change, but subsequently a couple of the class members have raised questions.

11. Are we committed to this?

We have signed an agreement with a rolling three month notice. It includes obligations for The Nursery on noise, a requirement to encourage local children, limits on the cars their staff can bring and so forth. It includes them committing to a waiver on potential tenancy rights. If this booking does not work well we could terminate the agreement.

12. What are the financials?

From March 2020 COVID severely reduced bookings income and also forced the cancellation of the 2020 Country Fair and the (financial) downgrading of the 2021 event. Despite a government emergency COVID grant of £10,000 in 2020 and £9,000 in 2021 the Hall is losing money. While we can hope and expect more bookings to come back the Halls finances are very stretched.

The Nursery will be paying around £18,000 pa from November. Without the Nursery we would be reliant on new fundraising and new or returning bookings to fill the gap. We have reserves of around £30,000 which we should keep for future (or further) emergencies (eg COVID may come back this winter). In short the Nursery deal is a lifeline and may also allow us to invest in improvements.

13. How secure is the income?

There was a Nursery in the Hall before - a deal which ended in 2016. We have no information on why that collapsed, but note the Village Nursery has been trading for 25 years. We are confident they should be long term partners. They are paying most of their bill in advance each term.

14. Committee role.

The Hall constitution requires us to safeguard the hall for the use of the village and our duty as Trustees is to ensure that it continues to be available.

In September taking the information above into account, and considering all advantages and disadvantages, the committee (Leo Seymour, Jonathan Iremonger, Diana Probyn, Andrew Hughes, David Pepper, Matt Millward) voted unanimously to approve the booking as follows.

Our decision (September)

The Village Hall Committee accepts the booking of The Village Nursery from November, subject to a contract that preserves our rights to terminate the agreement at three months' notice, including a waiver of any tenancy rights.

We do this noting our obligation as trustees of the hall, and also noting;

- a) The value to the East Meon community of improved childcare, as shown in the attached feedback from residents*
- b) The potentially positive effect on the school of a feeder nursery*
- c) The precedent of a nursery operating in the village hall in past years*
- d) The value of the potential income, which is especially welcome given the operating deficit of the hall*

We have also considered the reduced availability of the larger of our two halls that will result. But given the income, and that nursery hours are limited, the availability of the other hall, and potential for alternative arrangements we judge accepting the booking to be in the best interests of the community.

We will continue consultation in the coming weeks