



Coningsby Community Hall, Lincolnshire Wolverhampton



Location

Coningsby, Lincolnshire

Founded

The hall was developed in the early 1900s. The Trust was formed in the 1970s.

Legal structure

Unincorporated trust

Description of activity

Owns and manages a multi-use building, which hosts a variety of clubs, events and social gatherings

Key assets

Community building

Staff and volunteers

No staff and 12 volunteers (management committee)

Overview

Coningsby is a large village in the district of East Lindsey, Lincolnshire. Situated near to a large RAF base, the village serves as an important hub for local services and facilities. The Coningsby Community Hall is a multi-functional building which hosts local events, clubs and social gatherings. Originally a temperance hall, the building was acquired some decades ago and significantly extended.

The hall is run by an unincorporated charitable trust, with holding trustees and a management committee comprised of representatives from 12 local organisations, along with six elected and four co-opted members. The Trust uses a contracted caretaker and cleaner, but all other work to manage the building is carried out by volunteers. This is a significant undertaking as they maintain the space, schedule bookings and provide catering for key events. The hall benefits from significant local demand, with interviewees noting that at certain times they “can’t get everyone in that wants to use it.”

As a hub for the local community, the hall receives support from a number of important donors and local charitable organisations.

What difference community ownership makes

Volunteers see the hall as a critical “focal point” and “meeting place” for members of the community and somewhere people can “make friendships”, highlighting the vital role such buildings can play in fostering positive relations and interactions between people locally.

Those involved identify key benefits arising from the functions and services hosted by the building, for instance in reducing isolation among older



people. Luncheon clubs and other gatherings provide rare moments of social interaction for older residents. The hall is used by local charities who aim to support older people and create mental health benefits, as individuals “*get to see each other and have a natter.*” A luncheon club, based in the hall, has extended its services to deliver meals to the 15-20 people who cannot attend these sessions in person. The benefits therefore extend beyond the four walls of the hall.

Other health and wellbeing benefits are apparent, as a large number of leisure and cultural activities are hosted in the hall; yoga, pilates, junior theatre clubs, bowls, taekwondo, cheerleading classes, slimming groups, to name but a few. The hall therefore provides a vital space for people to engage in activities which have a positive impact on their quality of life.

Community ownership appears to have been central to this. Volunteers involved in the hall acknowledge the lack of public funds for such community space, and the trend in closure or privatisation of community buildings and facilities. As one volunteer noted:

“... if it was run by East Lindsey [the local authority] it would have been shut down years ago ... this is the only way to make it work.”

This is borne out in the way the organisation budgets, seeking to offer a price for hiring the venue which is just sufficient to cover costs. Some comparative research has been done and the hall clearly offers some of the lowest-cost meeting and event space in the local area.

Volunteers predicted that private ownership of the hall would lead to a very different business model. Significant volunteer time would likely be lost in this scenario, and this is a key factor in keeping prices low.

The involvement of volunteers is one of the defining features of the organisation, but this also represents one of its fragilities. Individual volunteers give significant amounts of time, and there are worries about identifying younger people who can take on responsibility for managing the hall in the future.

Financial health

The Trust seeks to achieve a balanced budget each year, with a limited surplus. It carries sufficient reserves to meet six months of expenses, with approximately £10,000 permanently held in the bank.

Three key factors that have affected its development and financial health:

1. Reduced running costs and approach to pricing

Rather than setting the price for bookings in such a way as to maximise income, the organisation does this by looking at its projected costs and then adjusting prices accordingly. This results in low prices, which are reflective of low running costs as the organisation draws on a large amount of volunteer time. Aside from paying a small amount for a caretaker and cleaner each year, the Trust has no other staffing costs. Significant volunteer hours are invested to ensure the smooth operation of the building and bookings, but also in the relevant administration and financial management. As one volunteer noted passionately “*people don't realise the time it takes ... or how much it costs to run.*” Low costs are also, naturally, made possible by having no rental or mortgage costs for the building, a feature of many village halls and community buildings.

This approach to budgeting may pose risks to the asset's sustainability. With limited reserves, replacing or repairing key parts of the building is difficult. Indeed, the organisation does not plan for cyclical replacement of large components of the building, having previously relied on donations and grants to replace windows and boilers. Volunteers would like to give the building a ‘facelift’ but the money for this is not allocated in yearly budgets. The hope is that a grant can be secured to undertake this work.

2. Local demand

The financial sustainability of the hall owes to the significant local demand for this space. From weekly clubs and social gatherings, to parties and other events which happen on a weekly basis, this is clearly a valued local asset. Demand to use the hall appears to be on an upward trend, as 2018 saw a 13 per cent increase in bookings. Such bookings constitute nearly 70 per cent of all income (grants constitute 13 per cent). Those managing the asset feel that this income is very resilient to wider economic changes. Whilst bookings declined somewhat during the period after the 2008 UK recession, this was not significant.



The extent of demand for the hall perhaps owes something to the local context. The parish of Coningsby had a population of 3,800 people in 2011 but this belies its function as a hub for surrounding villages, and a centre of employment for people in the wider district. Interviewees saw the hall as a “major asset in the village”, and a hub for local activity. There are perhaps lessons here about the size of the local population and workforce needed to sustain community buildings like Coningsby’s Community Hall.

3. Technical and financial support

A number of individuals and organisations have played a key role in supporting the Trust and the ongoing functions of the hall. Local donors have helped with urgent repairs and capital expenditures, as have local charitable trusts (e.g. the Stanley Barker Trust). Furthermore, national grant makers such as Wren, have been an important source of financial support. Added to this, East Lindsey District Council have provided small grants, and have given critical exemptions from local rates.

Valuable advice and support has also been provided by Community Lincs, a charity working across Lincolnshire to help individuals, groups and communities reduce isolation, increase community self-reliance and improve the skills and confidence of local people. Community Lincs have provided important advice to the Trust when facing important issues concerning their governance, property deeds and other operational challenges.

This financial and technical support, alongside strong local demand for use of the hall and a financial model based on low-running costs, has put the hall on a relatively firm footing. It has proven resilient to wider economic shocks and changes in the nature of demand for community spaces.

Financial information

The following table provides an overview of Coningsby Community Hall income, expenditure and assets for the year to October 2018.

Income	£18,920
Expenditure	£19,861
Difference between income and expenditure	-£941
Surplus/deficit on ordinary activities before taxation	-£941
Annual income from grant or subsidy	£2,500
Fixed assets	Not available
Current assets (Debtors; cash at bank and in hand)	Not available
Creditors: amounts falling due within one year	Not available
Total	Not available
Net assets	Not available