

**BRIDGNORTH TOWN COUNCIL
TOWN COUNCIL MEETING
7th September 2021**

LJ/2021

27th August 2021

REPORT TO TOWN COUNCILLORS

AGENDA ITEM 9 – CASTLE HALL - FEES FOR SENIOR CITIZENS

AIM

1. To consider a request from the Senior Citizens group that regularly use Castle Hall to have a reduction in fees.

BACKGROUND

2. A Senior Citizens group has for a number of years operated out of Castle Hall on Wednesday and Friday mornings for around 3 hours at a time. The Town Council has a special rate for the Group of £1845 per annum.
3. Over the past 18 months or so as a result of the ongoing pandemic they have not met or held any sessions.
4. In recent weeks they have returned to Castle Hall for one half day per week (Wednesday mornings).
5. We have received a request for a reduction in the current annual fee because they are only having use of the Hall once a week (instead of the usual 2).
6. The Town Mayor had sight of the request and was minded to support a reduction or waiver of the fees and discussed the matter at some length with officers who were asked to prepare a report and a recommendation for Council to consider.

DISCUSSION/ COMMENT

7. It is likely that many will see the Senior Citizens group as an important community group. The Town Council has been of that view in recent year's and this is demonstrated by the fact that the real hire rates for their 2 activities a week would result in a cost of some would be in excess of £6k per annum but offers the facility at a large discount by charging only £1845 per annum.

8. With the Senior Citizens group now only wanting the Hall for half the time it might not be unreasonable to reduce this year's fee by half and on a pro-rata basis (7 months September 2021 thru' March 2022). £538.13.
9. We are unsure as to the finances of the Group but, it is likely that they are not holding thousands of pounds of spare cash in the bank. The Council might want to have that information before setting any long-term discounted fee arrangement.
10. That the Group has not been functioning in its normal way might mean that membership/ demand has dropped over the past 18 months. It is likely that the volunteer committee will be under pressure to reinvigorate a niche but vital community service, along with many similar organisations. The headache of securing funding to renew the activity at this time might be disruptive when, their immediate priorities might be delivering pastoral care activity.

FINANCIALS

11. The Town Council budgeted income prediction at the beginning of the year included the figure of £1845 and any reduction in fee will have an impact. Clearly, it would not be reasonable to charge for periods when the Hall was not used. A pro-rata rate for reduced use (once per week instead of twice) would result in a reduced fee being £538.13 for the remainder of the year (assuming that the Council agrees that the 2 or 3 weeks in August attract no fee).
12. The loss of income could result in a number of actions including: a need to increase the level of taxation next year, the lowering of general reserves, a need to raise fees next year or a combination of some or all of these. However, the ups and downs of the past 12 -18 months are best assessed as a whole, across all the services the Council provides.
13. Castle Hall operates at a relatively significant loss each year. In part because, the Council offers a significantly reduced fee to the Senior Citizens Group as well as reduced fees for community groups and ad-hoc charitable events (e.g. The annual Lions prostate cancer health checks – for which no charge is levied). It is difficult to monetarise the community benefit but there is clearly some that can be sensed.

SUMMARY

14. A valuable community group is beginning to resurrect itself following a difficult period, for what some might see for its vulnerable users, and has approached the Town Council for a reduction in set fees.
15. The standard fee of £1845 set by the Council might now not be considered appropriate.

16. A suitable reduction would result in income for Castle Hall being reduced to around £540.

17. The function provided by the Senior Citizens group has some difficult-to-measure 'community benefit' but we can probably 'sense' it.

OPTIONS

18. Options include:

- a. Maintain the previous agreed annual fee £1845 and not offer a discount.
- b. Approve a reduced, fee based on less use and a pro-rata rate for the remainder of the current Financial Year i.e. £540.
- c. Waive the entire fee (for use of the majority of Castle Hall for half a day each Wednesday by the Senior Citizens Group) for the remainder of the current Financial Year and review the fees for next year as part of the budgeting process.

RECOMMENDATION(s)

19. It is recommended that the Town Council RESOLVES:

Waive the entire fee (for use of the majority of Castle Hall for half a day each Wednesday by the Senior Citizens Group) for the remainder of the current Financial Year and review the fees for next year as part of the budgeting process.



Lee Jakeman
Town Clerk