



Dereham Town Council

## **Report for Breckland Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**12<sup>th</sup> September 2013.**

'The journey of Dereham Memorial Hall since we were awarded the £250,000 grant from Breckland Council including the short (1yr) and medium (3yr) term plans for the Memorial Hall'.

Author: Tony Needham. Town Clerk

*"Perhaps the biggest contribution to improving the Breckland cultural offer would be to enhance the existing infrastructure intelligently, to enable a broader range of programmes to happen in decent quality surroundings. The effect ought to be to raise aspirations, build markets and improve the dynamic of the market towns.... The two key areas for development would seem to be Dereham and Thetford. The Dereham Memorial Hall scheme has been soundly researched and is a clear response to articulated local need.... This looks to be an excellent development, creating the right size of venue with a range of flexible spaces"*

*Breckland Cultural Strategy 2006.*

### **1.0 Background.**

In order to understand the journey from 2010 it is first important to understand the journey before we got to 2010 in order to appreciate how far we have come.

- In 1946 the UDC and the people of Dereham were looking for a suitable memorial to commemorate those men and women in the Town who had lost their lives in the two World Wars. The purchase of the current building was seen as a fitting tribute and was purchased by the UDC and opened in 1949
- 1952 new front was created.
- 1956 new heating system and rear extension was put in.
- Various minor changes and refurbishments. No major changes since 1956.
- From the time the building was purchased in late 1940s, there has always been a shortage of money to carry out a major refurbishment.
- 1973 the Town Council purchased Fleece Meadow at the rear of the Memorial Hall to facilitate an extension to the Hall.
- The Town Council recognised that the hall was in need of major refurbishment and extension work in the 1980s. Various plans were considered but nothing came to fruition.

## **2.0 Project development from 2006 onwards.**

- 62 Norwich Street and 58 Norwich Street were purchased by the Town Council to give greater flexibility to the design option and acquire certain access rights.
- 2007 a new Council started to look at the problem afresh and recognised the urgency of the situation i.e. if action was not taken quickly the building would need to close.
- A realistic assessment was made of external funding options.
- The Town Council had built up a reserve towards some of the costs
- Option of taking out loan was investigated – limit of £500k per year was a problem but were able to negotiate an exception to this rule with the DCLG. A Public Works Load Board loan was the main source of funding for the project.
- Sale of part of Fleece Meadow - sale fell through
- Breckland funding was essential for extending the functionality of the building.

## **3.0 Construction works.**

- August 2010 work started on site.
- Various problems arose during the construction but the project contingency reserve was able to cover these issues.
- Project was delayed due to weather and additional works.
- Build was completed in December 2011 - on budget.

## **4.0 Progress since construction work has finished.**

It must always be remembered that the Memorial Hall is a community building used for many different events and community activities. It was however envisaged that more cultural events would take place in the Hall when it opened and this has been a focus for the past few years. When the business plan was put it was envisaged that the Town Council would promote events at the Hall when completed and it put funds aside for this purpose. It later came to light that due to the VAT Act 1994, sch 9, Group 13, it would not be possible for the Town Council to promote cultural shows at the Hall.

An alternative strategy to bring cultural events to the Hall is being pursued. Prior to the Hall opening, three professional organisations had been approached who showed interest in developing a partnership to produce a regular programme. These partnerships fell through because the organisations either wanted complete control of all activities or were too expensive. The Town Council also supported the Dereham Festival last year, and the Hall has hosted a wide range of live shows since it opened.

## **5.0 Short term plan (1 year ) and medium term (3 year) plan**

Broadly speaking both the short and long term plans for the Memorial Hall are the same and that is to increase its usage, both for community events and cultural events – in a way which makes the venue financially sustainable.

Increasing cultural events is most complex and this will be dealt with first:

Our strategy here is to make it easy for organisations and individuals to promote cultural events at the Hall; a £23,000 budget has been set aside for this strategy.

The following is in place to deliver this strategy:

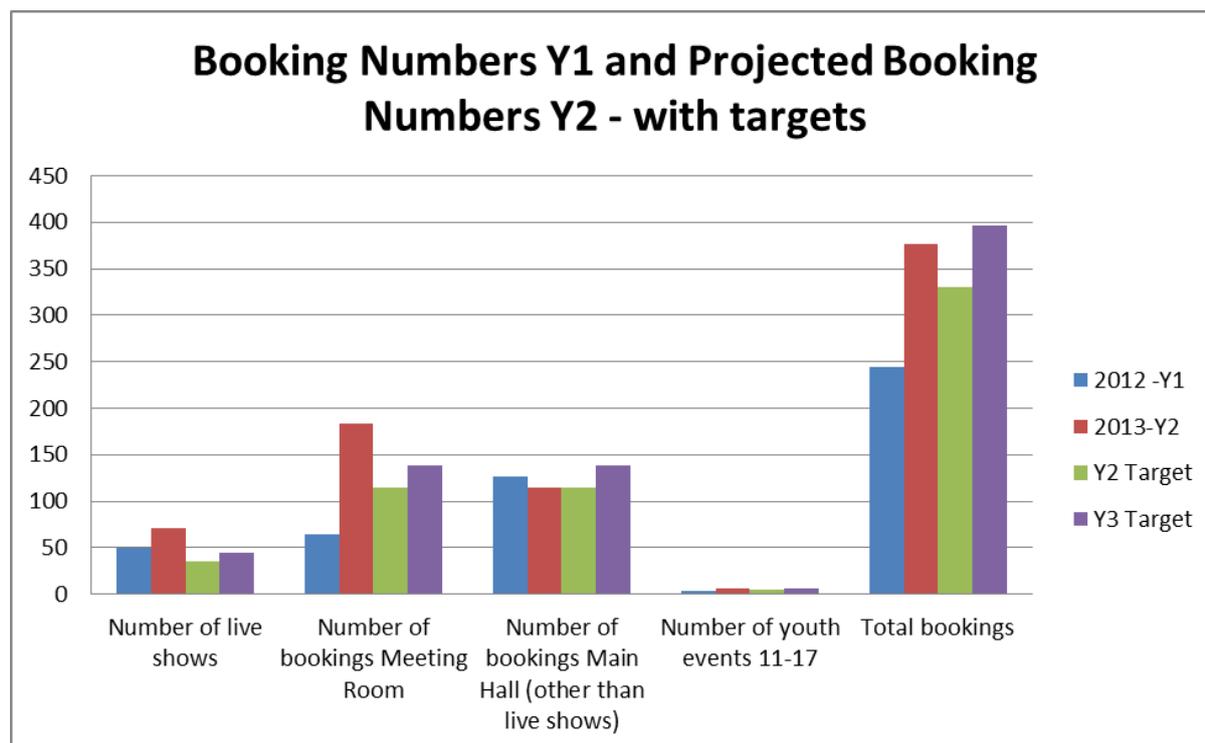
- Box office facilities
- Promotion through brochure and website
- Front of house provision
- Technical manager to advise on technical set up
- Offer box office split on hire fees
- Discount rates for not for profit organisations
- Providing basic technical equipment
- Additional support for events for young people

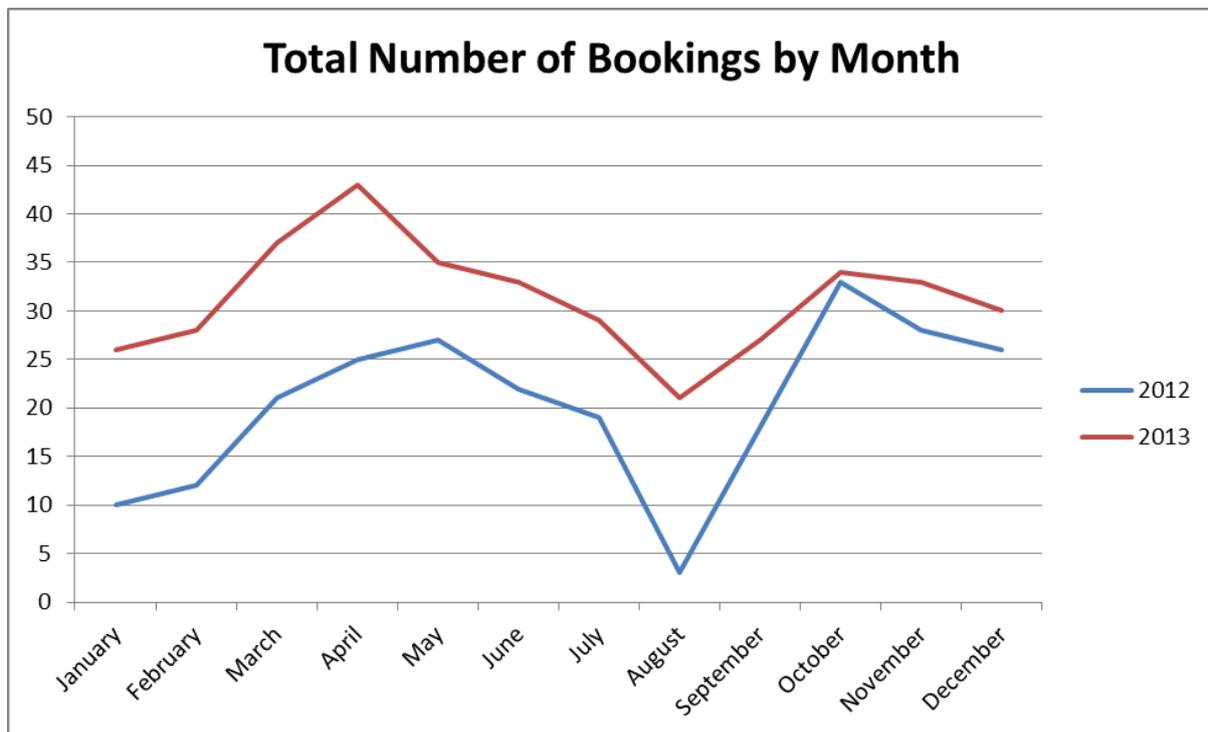
### 6.0 How effective is the Plan?

The Council reviews this strategy regularly and changes are made in the light of evidence. It should be remembered, however, that any modifications to the strategy will not yield results until 6-8 months after the change, and may not be seen in the data for 12 months.

As can be seen from the table below, the strategy seems to be working. On the whole the Hall is exceeding its anticipated usage at this point in time.

The area where the Council would particularly like to see improvement is events for young people, which is why the Town Council, at its last meeting, has agreed to look into additional measures to support activities for young people. There were 6 events for young people in Y2 against a target of 5 for Y2 and 6 for Y3.





#### 6.1 Income.

The old Hall was expensive to run, had limited facilities and was inflexible in how the building could be used. These problems limited the ability of the Hall to generate sufficient income to make a surplus (excluding labour costs). In the first full financial year of operation since the refurbishment, the Hall has produced a surplus of just over £12,000. This surplus goes some way to cover the labour costs.

#### 6.2 Community use and private functions.

The Hall is used for many community events such as regular Bingo, U3A, Blood Donor sessions, meditation classes, parties, weddings, conferences etc. The issues that need looking at, for this area, are simplifying the booking process and further promoting the facility.

#### 6.3 Bar area/ coffee shop.

- It was the intention to have the bar area let out on a daily basis. Letting this space is not straight forward because of how the building is used and any licensee would not have exclusive use of the space.
- A licensee moved into this space as soon as the Hall opened and occupied the space for nearly a year.
- Town Council has been working with a new licensee, who will be operating the coffee shop as a training project for adults with learning difficulties. This is due to open in mid-October.

#### 6.4 Unpredicted benefits

A benefit not predicted at the time of the application was the benefit to local charities. Many voluntary groups use the hall for fundraising events. It is estimated that in the last 12 months around £10,000 has been raised for local charities through events held at the Hall. These have included – NNAB, Dereham Cancer Care and East Anglian Air ambulance.

## **7.0 Reporting to Breckland Council**

Regular reports have been submitted to Breckland Council over the years, detailed below, we have never received any formal response from these reports and visit.

- Report - December 2010
- Report -January 2011
- Report - June 2011
- Report - January 2012
- Report - January 2013
- Monitoring visit April 2013

## **8.0 Value for money**

Without the investment made by both the Town Council and the District Council the Memorial Hall would have closed. The Hall is now set to serve the people of Dereham and the surrounding areas for a further 100 years, it is well used and usage is increasing. The grant of £250,000 ( 9% of the total project cost) is relative to the number of people benefiting. The £250,000 is equivalent to around £14 per head of population in Dereham, but, as can be seen by the level of interest, the Hall serves a much wider area than just the Town; therefore the population which use the hall is probably double the Dereham population. This is a key point; unlike village halls, which tend to serve very small communities, the Memorial Hall serves a large part of the north of the District.

## **9.0 Conclusion**

The grant given to the Hall was good value for Breckland Council the following reasons:

- Without the refurbishment the Hall would now be closed.
- Breckland's funding extended the building and improved functionality enabling more flexibility in its use and ultimately better financial sustainability.
- It will serve the north of the District for many decades to come.
- The performance is broadly what we were expecting at this stage – some areas performing better than expected, other areas we would like to see improvement.
- This is very much the start of a process it is going well and getting better all the time.