

The Clubhouse Project – Report and appeal for funding

Background - As the Parish Council will be aware, the Brian Whitehead Sports and Social Club (BWSSC) folded around the beginning of 2020, after many years of decline.

This presented a significant threat to the individual sports clubs who rely on the building in various ways, and the viability of the whole Wick Lane Sports Complex. For Downton Football Club (DFC) in particular, the social club's closure represented a major setback as, although it had never had any control over the BWSSC, the social club was used as the DFC's unofficial clubhouse. DFC's membership/qualification to the Wessex League (stadia requirements) is dependent upon access to social facilities for both players, officials and fans. With little prospect of another viable tenant taking on the social club, its permanent closure/mothballing, including the Sherwood Rooms, was a fairly likely outcome. Not only would this threaten the viability of DFC, but also the loss of a terrific potential community resource to the village.

Therefore, the BWSCA and DFC agreed that DFC would take on the old social club building and the Sherwood Room on a rent and revenue-share basis, and look to refurbish it and re-open it both as a clubhouse for the football club, but also a venue for the village more widely.

The Clubhouse Project - Therefore, since August, a dedicated sub-committee of Downton Football Club was formed to manage the project, co-chaired by Luke Wordley and Andy Townsend, and including Richard Fishlock, Jenny Wordley, Hilary and Pete Clapperton, Ross Arnold and Jody Curle.

Our aim and vision is to open a fantastic new social and community facility for the village called 'The Clubhouse'. As well as providing a lovely social venue for all the sports clubs and leisure centre members based at the Wick Lane site, (+ existing Bridge Club, Bingo Club, Darts Club, Pool Teams etc), our vision is for 'The Clubhouse' and refurbished Sherwood Rooms is to provide a community resource for the whole village. Initial discussions have already been held with various voluntary groups, clubs and stakeholders like the GP Surgery, who would like to use it as a venue for social prescribing activities like loneliness and wellbeing groups. If there are any profits raised, they will be re-invested into the facilities and used to further develop Downton Football Club and, in particular, its youth football offering.

Financial Investment - In close collaboration with the BWSCA, hundreds of hours of volunteer time have already been spent renovating the building, into a pleasant, welcoming new venue. Thousands of pounds worth of specialist skills have also been given and pledged by parents, players and village tradesmen to improve the venue. However, the social club is in an extremely poor state of repair and nearly every piece of equipment is 30 years old and broken or uncompliant with modern standards/requirements. Therefore, significant financial investment is required to be able to further renovate, furnish and equip 'The Clubhouse' to a state where we can open it again as a safe and modern venue. Our estimates are that we need to raise around £20-£25K in the first phase in fundraised income. This is to fund new quality flooring (a big area!), replacement of all lighting, a new entrance with glass doors, new furniture throughout, new fridges, glass washers, new bar equipment, decorating throughout, various internal building (cupboards etc), outside painting, new signage, outside furniture and a myriad of smaller things.

Impact of COVID - The COVID pandemic has severely hampered our ability to progress this project. The cancellation of now two Cuckoo Fayres, which removed the football club's main fundraising income, not to mention the inability to hold fundraising events due to restrictions on social gatherings, and the reduction to almost zero of gate receipts and refreshment sales due to the cancellation/disruption of

Wessex League football for now two seasons, mean the football club itself is already under significant financial pressure.

Fundraising - We therefore looked to benefit from a Sport England initiative of up to £10,000 match-funding through their Active Together 'Crowdfunder' scheme and spent a great deal of time shaping our project to meet their criteria. We felt with a fair wind and the motivation of pound-for-pound match-funding that we could raise £10,000, to attract £10,000 of match-funding from Sport England.

Unfortunately, at the very last minute, they introduced means-testing of our area, reducing the 'match-funding' to 30% only, meaning we suddenly needed to raise £14,000 to receive £6,000 of Sport England funds in just 8 weeks!

We have had a fantastic crack at raising these funds, starting with our own football club community, and then the wider Downton community. Despite the challenges of fundraising in a 2nd lockdown, we have raised around £9,000 from more than 100 donors in the last six weeks. Sport England have made their pledge of £6,000, but receiving this is dependent on reaching our overall £20,000 target. (They also won't count the additional £2,000 of Gift Aid we have had pledged!)

Immediate need of financial help - Unfortunately, with just 13 days to go at time of writing (Friday 22nd January), we remain around £5,000 short of our target, and our momentum has stalled massively in the last week as we feel we have begun to exhaust our main supporter base! We hope we can persuade Sport England to allow us to extend our campaign if we cannot hit our target by 3rd February. However, we don't receive any of the funds until we complete the campaign and so the BWSCA and committee individuals are currently providing the cashflow to the project and are really up to their limits! In addition, we have offered 'The Clubhouse' and adjoining Sherwood Rooms to the Downton Surgery for the village vaccination centre (likely from beginning of February) so we need to get the fundraising campaign completed so we can finish preparing the venue as soon as possible.

We would therefore be incredibly grateful if the Parish Council were able to support this initiative and help us to get over the line with a significant donation. This will in turn secure £6,000 of vital funding from Sport England.

Conclusion - We are sorry if this may appear like this request is coming late but we have wanted to put our own money where our mouth is as a football club first and foremost. And indeed, if we had received pound for pound match-funding as originally hoped, we would virtually be there without calling on the Parish Council at this difficult time financially.

However, a donation of up to £5,000 from the Parish Council will play a key role in helping establish a fantastic resource again at the west-end of the village which will benefit our community enormously. We are also very proud of the positive impact Downton Football Club is having on our community, as the fastest growing youth football club in South Wiltshire. Hopefully, the video in the Crowdfunder page below will give a glimpse of this.

Likewise, under the 'Updates' section, you will see 'before' and 'after' pictures showing just a little of the improvements we have already made to the venue.

If any councillors would like to see 'The Clubhouse' before or after Monday's meeting, please do give me a call on 07834 352647 and I would be delighted to show you around.

<https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/downton-football-club-community-clubhouse-project>

Luke Wordley