Planning Inspectorate

Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 24 June 2026

by H Marriott MPlan MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 6 July 2026

Appeal Ref: 6008308
Crowland Community Hall, 65 Broadway, Crowland, Peterborough, Lincolnshire PE6 0BH

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended) against a refusal to grant planning permission.
- The appeal is made by Mr Mohammed Haseeb against the decision of South Holland District Council.
- The application Ref is H02-1106-25.
- The development is described as 'change of use red mark area to storage'.

Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. The description in the banner heading is taken from the application form with removal of the term 'retrospective' since this is not a description of development. The Council's decision refers to 'change of use of community hall section for commercial storage'. This description is also reflected in the appellant's appeal form. I have therefore had regard to this revised description in my assessment.

3. At the time of my site visit, I observed that the development has been carried out. I noted that stacked boxes and packages containing a range of items, including light homeware, fine china, cutlery and cleaning equipment were being stored. The application form confirms that the use commenced in February 2025 and follows the refusal of a similar planning application[1]. Nevertheless, my assessment has been undertaken on the basis of the plans and evidence before me.

4. The development affects only part of the building located at 65 Broadway (No 65). It is clear from the plans and evidence submitted, that the change of use relates to the front section of building, comprising a hall, lobby and toilet (the Hall). The rear section of the building is used as a children's nursery. I have determined the appeal on this basis.

Main Issue

5. The main issue is the effect of the change of use on the provision of community facilities in the area, with particular regard to the requirements of the Development Plan.

[1] *Council ref: H02-0282-25*

Reasons

Policy context

6. Policy 32 of the South East Lincolnshire Local Plan 2011-2036 (2019) (SELLP) sets out that the change of use of an existing community facility will be permitted only if one of three criteria is satisfied. In the context of the appeal development, only the first two criteria are of relevance.

7. Firstly, an assessment must clearly show that the facility is a. surplus to requirements; or b. not economically viable; or c. unfit for purpose. Secondly, the loss resulting from the change of use will be replaced by equivalent or better provision (in terms of quantity and quality) in a suitable nearby location. This aligns with Paragraph 98 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) which states that planning decisions should guard against the unnecessary loss of valued facilities and services, particularly where this would reduce the community's ability to meet its day-to-day needs.

Whether surplus to requirements

8. Prior to its use for storage, the Hall accommodated a mixture of one-off and regular bookings, including for parties, fitness classes, dance classes, religious gatherings and as use as a polling station. It can therefore reasonably be regarded as a community facility, notwithstanding its omission from Crowland's wellbeing map. Crowland contains a range of community facilities and services, including the Community Hub (the Hub), Crowland Leisure and Wellbeing Centre (the Centre), Crowland Abbey, the Methodist Church, Snowden Pavillion and Crowland Parish rooms. Village halls outside of Crowland in nearby settlements have also been identified. The appellant contends that the former leisure/fitness uses undertaken at the Hall can be readily accommodated within these alternative facilities and that sufficient capacity exists elsewhere to meet local demand.

9. However, I have not been provided with detailed information to enable a direct comparison between the Hall and the alternative facilities identified. In particular, there is limited information regarding their respective sizes, capacities or suitability for different activities. As a result, I cannot reasonably conclude that these facilities provide an equivalent alternative to the Hall in terms of meeting the community's day to day needs. While schedules of events at the Hub and the Centre indicate that periods of availability exist, this does not in itself demonstrate that equivalent alternative provision is available, particularly at times when demand is likely to be the greatest. Moreover, interested parties indicate that the Hall maybe larger than both the Hub and the Centre, potentially increasing its flexibility for a greater range of uses.

10. The evidence before me indicates that the Hall remained in active community use, with bookings continuing until at least January 2025[2], immediately prior to its use for storage. While some activities, including, Zumba classes, relocated to the Centre, and others reportedly ceased due to declining attendance, this does not establish that the Hall was no longer needed. The relocation or cessation of individual activities may arise for a variety of reasons and does not demonstrate that the demand for the Hall as a whole had diminished. Nor does it demonstrate

[2] *Hall hire invoice dated 18 January 2025*

that all former users were able to access equivalent alternative accommodation elsewhere.

11. Consequently, on the evidence before me I am not satisfied that the Hall is surplus to requirements.

Whether or not economically viable

12. No 65 was previously operated by Royal British Legion Club Ltd (RBL). RBL made a decision to sell the premises around September 2020. The reasons advanced for that decision referred to a consistent drop in membership and revenue over many years, leading to a unanimous decision to close the club while it remained able to meet its existing liabilities. Despite some gaps in the records, financial evidence indicates that No 65 operated at a loss throughout the period 2010-2020, with the exception of 2013 when a small profit was recorded. The reasons cited included declining community participation and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

13. The appeal building changed ownership in around October 2021, and planning permission[3] was granted in April 2022 for part of No 65 to be used as a children's nursery. In addition, the Council separately refused an application to list No 65 as an Asset of Community Value (ACV) in July 2021. However, that decision related principally to the ability of the nominating community group to acquire and manage the building, rather than a finding that the Hall, which forms only part of No 65, lacked community value or satisfied the requirements of Policy 32 of the SELLP.

14. While the associated ACV report acknowledged a number of constraints affecting No 65, including parking limitations and the financial difficulties experienced by RBL, the evidence largely relates to the operation of No 65 as a whole under its former ownership and management arrangements. Consequently, while the RBL records provide a useful indication of No 65's historic financial performance, they are of limited assistance in establishing the Hall's more recent viability as a community facility. For similar reasons, I am not satisfied that the Hall's viability has necessarily diminished due to the loss of income generating elements such as a bar, snooker tables and membership fees, as the evidence before me does not clearly demonstrate the extent to which those income streams positively or negatively contributed to the operation of the Hall itself.

15. No 65 was closed for around 18 months while refurbishment works were undertaken. The Hall subsequently reopened in around August/September 2023 and remained available for community use until February 2025. The appellant actively marketed the Hall through social media advertising, a dedicated website and leaflet distribution, although it is unclear, aside from on-site signage, whether that marketing was continually refreshed following its initial opening. There is no dispute between the main parties that the Hall's hire charging was broadly comparable to those of other local facilities. However, the period for which the Hall was available following its reopening was relatively limited, particularly given that the Hall was re-establishing its user base and community presence following a prolonged closure.

16. The appellant has submitted information on the Hall's operational costs including receipts, invoices and summaries. While this has not been presented as part of an

[3] *Council refs: H02-0945-22 and H02-0998-25 Proposed change of use of British Legion Club to child nursery and community hall with external alterations.*

independently prepared viability appraisal, the appellant's 2022-2024 Ownership Summary (the Summary), contained at page 14 of its statement, appears to provide the most recent overview of the Hall's financial position. The Summary indicates that the Hall has operated at a net deficit and incurred an overall financial loss during the appellant's ownership, and that no salary has been drawn in connection with its operation.

17. Nevertheless, I am not satisfied that this, in itself, demonstrates that the use is no longer economically viable. A net deficit during that period is not unexpected given that the Hall was unavailable for bookings for a significant proportion of that time and No 65 was undergoing refurbishment. Moreover, the evidence does not clearly explain how costs are apportioned between the Hall and the wider building. Consequently, I am unable to determine the extent to which the reported losses are attributed to the operation of the Hall alone. The refurbishment works included the installation of a new boiler, a new wall, signage, deep cleaning, new furniture, painting and various compliance requirements, including gas and electrical certification, a fire risk assessment and insurance. While there are undoubtedly costs associated with operating the hall including heating, licensing, insurance, cleaning and maintenance, some of the expenditure may have related to No 65 as a whole rather than being confined to, or necessary for, operation of the Hall itself.

18. In any event, the Summary indicates that income increased between 2022 and 2024. While a deficit remained in 2024, it was lower when viewed in isolation from the cumulative losses incurred during the preceding years of the appellant's ownership. In addition, some expenditure during that period appears to have related to one-off or non-recurring items, including furniture purchases, which would not necessarily arise in subsequent years.

19. Policy 32 of the SELLP does not provide a definition of 'not economically viable' or prescribe specific viability criteria, nor does it require an appellant to demonstrate unviability over a defined period. Therefore, this is a matter of planning judgement. In this case, the evidence before me does not provide a sufficiently clear indication of the Hall's financial performance as a stand-alone use. Moreover, the evidence does not demonstrate that reasonable steps to improve the Hall's financial performance or to secure a viable operating model have been tried.

20. The appellant contends that it would be unreasonable to expect the Hall to reopen solely for the purpose of generating further evidence of demand or viability, and that, following its closure, former user groups may be difficult to re-establish. However, the burden remains on the appellant to demonstrate compliance with Policy 32 of the SELLP. While the evidence points to financial challenges, and I accept that some regular bookings may have been difficult to sustain and that the income generated from one off uses may have been uncertain, such factors are not uncommon in the operation of community facilities such as village halls.

21. Taking all these factors together, including the absence of clearer and sustained evidence regarding the Hall's financial performance as a stand-alone community facility, I am not satisfied that it has been demonstrated that the Hall is no longer economically viable.

Whether suitably replaced

22. The appeal development does not propose the reprovision of the Hall with equivalent or better provision (in terms of quantity and quality) in a suitable nearby

location. Therefore, it would not comply with the second criterion of Policy 32 of the SELLP.

Summary

23. The appellant submits that the decision should be determined on the balance of probabilities. However, the determination of a planning application involves the exercise of planning judgement having regard to the development plan and all other material considerations.

24. The development secures an alternative use of the Hall and provides some economic benefits, including supporting the business to expand, modernise and respond to changing needs. However, it also results in the loss of a community facility, and I have found that it has not been demonstrated that it is surplus to requirements or not economically unviable.

25. Consequently, I conclude that it has not been demonstrated that the development does not result in an unacceptable effect on the provision of community facilities in the area, with particular regard to the requirements of the Development Plan. In this regard, it would conflict with Policy 32 of the SELLP for the aforementioned reasons. It also conflicts with the Framework's social objective of supporting strong, vibrant and healthy communities and its aim of avoiding the loss of a valued facilities and services that could reduce the community's ability to meet its day-to-day needs.

Other Matters

26. The Council raises no objection on grounds relating to living conditions, highway safety or biodiversity net gain. It is also acknowledged that the appellant engaged with the Council throughout the application process and provided additional information in response to requests. However, these matters do not alter my findings on the main issue.

27. The appellant has drawn my attention to planning permissions[4] relating to the changes of use of a former church and post office elsewhere in the district. However, the full planning circumstances of those cases, including the evidence before the decision-maker, are not before me. I have therefore determined the appeal on its own merits. Accordingly, these examples have not been determinative in my overall assessment.

Conclusion

28. The development conflicts with the development plan and the material considerations do not indicate that the appeal should be decided other than in accordance with it. For the reasons given above the appeal should be dismissed.

H Marriott

INSPECTOR

[4] *Council refs: H09-0697-24 and H21-0514-24.*