



Highnam Community Centre Trust



AIM FOR quality and a professional level of service – that's the secret of successful community room hire, according to Paddy Roche, former Chairman of the **Highnam** Community Centre Trust.

And he should know, because, as volunteer manager for the Trust's three community buildings in the village of Highnam, near Gloucester, he has seen the results of significant investment in the Old School, the Parish Rooms and the new-build Gambier Parry Hall.

"We have three buildings, all offering different types and sizes of accommodation. Each is potentially available for three different uses per day – morning, afternoon and evening. **And we are currently celebrating almost 80 per cent use!**"

Highnam's proximity to Gloucester, with easy road access and plenty of car parking for the halls is, of course, part of the success story which includes regular bookings from organisations including local authorities and the Primary Care Trust. But the repeat bookings would not happen if the service wasn't right.

"There is always a bit of a debate about how much you should spend refurbishing, providing new services or on building work – but if you want to attract corporate hirers during the day, they demand a professional level of facilities," said Paddy.

"The income we bring in from corporate hire keeps our heads above water. But it took a bit of persuading when we wanted to spend £24,000 to update the Parish Rooms which the Trust funded with the help of the Parish Council. The new Gambier Parry hall received half its £600,000

funding from Tewkesbury Borough Council and the rest through the parish rates over 25 years.

"It's the quality of the venues and the 'extras' like the catering kitchen, the water coolers, the IT and PA systems and projector screens are what brings in the custom. It was essential to attract regular income from daytime hirers so that we could cater for local organisations in the evenings. We now host 45 different evening clubs, societies and groups and have on-line booking information on our website."

But managing the halls takes time. "I was a volunteer for four years, and now I get an allowance which just about covers my petrol and phone bills. It takes several hours a day to sort out the bookings and the website, but it is a job I love and I get a great deal out of it," said Paddy.

Investment in the halls has also brought other benefits to the village's economy. "We have weddings and other celebrations in the hall and people want to stay locally in bed and breakfasts or local hotels. We also recommend local caterers for the events – and, as we have a key pick up arrangement with the village shop, when people collect the key, they often buy their tea, coffee and biscuits there, which boosts the shop's trade.

Paddy advised: "In the end, you have to be ambitious – set your standards high and keep them high, make sure you offer an efficient, business-like service and people will come flocking. Remember, you have to strive to be easy to deal with and customer friendly."

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