

Parochial Halls / Parish Community Centres

Many parish and Community Halls throughout Ireland were built in the 3 decades following World War II. Apart from providing badly needed local functional facilities, Parochial Halls became important venues for social assembly, serving a new generation of local communities.

The past number of years however, has seen many changes in the management and use of Parish Halls and Parish Community Centres. Some have been passed on to local community groups under long term leases, others are managed by independent local community associations while many have remained under Parish control. Nevertheless, in all cases there are Insurance, Health & Safety and loss prevention implications including:

- 1: Cover
- 2: Ownership of the property
- 3: Occupancy/usage

Cover under the Parish Protection Policy in regard to legal liability issues can be complex.

Trustees or Parish as owners and managers of the hall:

It is the responsibility of the Parish (Trustees) to maintain the hall and its environs, furniture and equipment in a safe condition. If an accident is caused by a defect in any of these, then the Parish (Trustees) can be sued for damages.

Does our liability extend to users of the hall?

Legal liability can attach to the Parish irrespective of the activities in the hall or who is using the hall. In general, the hirer of the hall does not have any control over the condition of the premises (e.g., if there was a loose slate, they would not be responsible for carrying out repairs) and as such it would be difficult to hold the hirer responsible for an accident resulting from such a defect in the hall or its environs. However, the policy does provide cover for the legal liability of the Parish (Trustees) in these circumstances.

Activities in the hall:

Activities in the hall can be many and varied and can be organized by a variety of interested parties, such as:

- (a) The clergy
- (b) A committee authorized by and under the control of the clergy
- (c) Others, which we refer to as an outside group

The Parish Protection Policy provides cover for “any Parish activity which is carried out with the full knowledge and authority of and under the control of the clergy or any other person specifically authorised by them”. Therefore, activities organized by the clergy or by a committee authorised by them or under their control are included in the policy.

What about the activities of outside groups?

Where there is an accident arising from the activities of an outside group an action for compensation can be taken against:

- (a) The Parish and / or Trustees as owners of the hall.
- (b) The outside group as occupiers / users.

The Parish Policy provides cover for the Parish and / or Trustees as owners of the hall, as explained earlier.

The outside group however, should have their own separate insurance arrangements in place to cover their own separate legal liability. In the absence of insurance, the members of the group could be held personally liable for the accident or injury and consequently any damages awarded.

Should evidence of insurance be produced before the hall is let?

Preferably, yes. However, to ease the difficulties which may be encountered in relation to low-risk activities such as meetings, we suggest you employ the following differential procedure:

- (a) Casual lettings to individuals or informal groups on the community for low-risk activities (e.g., meetings) may be permitted without evidence of insurance. However, they should all be advised of the necessity to affect their own insurance and a note along the following lines should be considered.

“The Trustees and Parish have an insurance policy covering their ownership and management of the hall. Persons, groups, associations, clubs and others hiring the hall can incur liabilities, which may not be covered by the Parish policy, arising from the activities which they promote and organise. All such persons, groups, associations, clubs and others using the hall are accordingly advised to arrange suitable insurance to cover their activities”.

- (b) Evidence of public liability insurance should be requested for all other lettings. The policy should include an indemnity to the Trustees and Parish. A letter from the insurer or insurance broker confirming the following should be requested:

- (i) Name of Insurer.
- (ii) Public Liability Policy Number.
- (iii) Name of Insured.
- (iv) Period of Insurance.
- (v) Business / Activities covered.
- (vi) Limit of Indemnity.
- (vii) The hall is included in the policy as a premises used by the persons, group etc.
- (viii) The policy includes an indemnity to the Parish and Trustees.

Some additional guidelines for letting the Parish Hall or Community Centre:

1. Before permission is granted for use of the hall:

- (a) Ensure that the hall is suitable for the use / activities proposed.
- (b) Ensure that the use proposed is not excluded under the Parish Policy.
- (c) Implement definitive procedures establishing responsibility for opening and closing the hall.
- (d) Ensure that the user takes appropriate steps to prevent unauthorised access while the hall is open.
- (e) No equipment (particularly electrical) to be brought into the hall without prior agreement.
- (f) Familiarise the user with emergency procedures, exits, etc.
- (g) Familiarise the user with location of fire notices and other emergency equipment.
- (h) For nighttime usage ensure the outside lighting is in working order.
- (i) Where appropriate, bring any disclaimer notice(s) to the attention of the user.
- (j) Outline insurance requirements.
- (k) Provide a copy of the Safety Statement to the user.

2. Conditions of Use:

The hall is run on a voluntary basis for the benefit of the Parish. Groups using the hall should play their part in maintaining a high standard of housekeeping.

- (a) The user must check hall before use to make sure there are no hazards.
- (b) The user must ensure that emergency exits are not obstructed.
- (c) The user must ensure that fire extinguishers are unobstructed.
- (d) Where hall equipment or furniture is used it must be put back after such use.
- (e) The user must clean and tidy up the hall after each use.

3. When used for Functions:

- (a) The organisers must ensure that the seating capacity is not exceeded.
- (b) The organisers must ensure that any seating is linked where appropriate (e.g.: concerts or plays)
- (c) The organisers must ensure that the licensed capacity for a dance is not exceeded and that a dance license has been granted.
- (d) The organisers must ensure that stewarding arrangements are adequate.
- (e) Emergency procedures to be announced prior to commencement of the function where appropriate.