

## Case Study

# Fittleworth Community Shop

### Background

When the village shop and post office closed in 2011 the residents of Fittleworth, West Sussex consistently expressed their concern over the lack of any shop and community hub in the village.

The Parish Council established a working party in January 2016 to look at the need and viability of a community owned and run shop and café. A subsequent questionnaire was distributed to the 450 households making up the village, along with other interested groups and stakeholders.

60% of the questionnaires were returned with 82% of respondents considering a shop and café as important, or very important.

The project was established as a key priority in the Parish Council's 5 year Strategic Plan and is featured in the Neighbourhood Plan.

With a clear appetite for the project within the village, the working party carried out a further consultation including location plans and design options. This resulted in more detailed feedback confirming the overwhelming support which included significant financial donations, professional support in-kind and offers of voluntary assistance to staff the café and shop.



### The project

The working party realised the true extent of local backing for this project when, upon asking for initial donations of £15,000 towards setup costs, villagers donated a total of £28,550.

The group initially approached the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) to see what support was available as, although the group had relevant professional experience amongst them, they had no experience of setting up and running a community shop.

SDNPA provided advice on fundraising and planning, and put the group in touch with the Plunkett Foundation who provided guidance in formalising the constitution, developing the scheme and funding.

After much research and further consultation, it was decided to operate the shop as a Community Benefit Society (CBS) – a not-for-profit community owned and operated social enterprise. At this point the project became independent of the Parish Council although the Council have remained fully supportive throughout.

Suitable land was identified in the centre of the village near the village hall and school which the Parish Council Council agreed to lease to Fittleworth Community Shop Ltd.

The Sustainable Communities Fund of the National Park offered a £10,000 grant to the project to start the fundraising phase. This was phenomenally successful and raised a total of £450,000 through community events, grants and donations.

This enabled the group to be more ambitious and to include the redevelopment of the adjacent play area in the scope of the project; an important addition to deliver the “meeting place” and “hub” that the community desired.

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“It’s lovely to see so many new faces. People who have lived here for 10 years and more have been telling us that they have met for the first time.”

Sammi Leese, Committee Member of Fittleworth Community Shop Ltd.

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## The outcome

Fittleworth Stores opened their doors to customers on Monday 1st October 2018 and in their first three weeks sold 1,146 cups of coffee as well as a fair amount of cake and sausage rolls.

The Stores have taken sustainability and local suppliers to the core of their business by launching meals and cakes from a local caterer, coffee blended by a local roaster and meat supplied by a local butcher. Since opening, the range of local produce has expanded to include products from over 30 local suppliers, including bread, fish, eggs, fruit and vegetables, flowers and local art and craft. Services were extended even further when a Post Office opened in the shop during January 2019.

Five staff members are supported by a team of five paid teenagers and 50 volunteers to keep the shop open seven days a week. Sales in the shop and café have exceeded initial forecasts and are rapidly growing with incredibly positive feedback from local and visiting customers.

Being adjacent to the school, the wider area has become a real focal point for the community with families and children enjoying the outdoor play equipment, along with the more recent additions of bike racks and a recreation area for older children.



## The future

Fittleworth Stores continue to embed their community ethos by recruiting and training volunteers (including their growing team of Duke of Edinburgh and work experience students) and by hosting and planning a range of events for the community. Their recent pancake day was a huge success with adults and locals coming together to enjoy a pancake or two.

Acting as a local community hub is at the heart of Fittleworth Stores with local community representatives holding surgeries and drop in sessions within the café. Plans are now afoot to introduce groups, such as knitting circles and community services such as a book exchange scheme.

Fittleworth Stores has become an exemplar for what can be achieved when communities come together to tackle challenging yet widespread issues.

The team would encourage other communities to rise to the challenge and would be happy to share what they have learnt. Visit [www.fittleworthstores.co.uk](http://www.fittleworthstores.co.uk) and [www.southdowns.gov.uk/scf](http://www.southdowns.gov.uk/scf) for more information.

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