

Blue Bell Community Hub, Cocking

www.bluebellhub.org

www.thebluebellatcocking.co.uk

Background

The Blue Bell Community Hub sits in a conservation area of Cocking, a village South of Midhurst in West Sussex. The former public house sat empty for several years and narrowly survived being converted into houses. Instead, it has now become the heart of the village. It has undergone a transformation from a dilapidated eyesore to a smart, multi purpose, useful hub for the community.

The hub is owned and managed by the community itself through a Community Benefit Society (CBS) and is the first of its kind in the South Downs National Park (SDNP).

Villagers were consulted about the importance of having a 'local', and there was overwhelming support for maintaining and enhancing a pub, café, restaurant and B&B venue. It is ideally situated for visitors wanting accommodation or refreshment whilst exploring the area.

Locals voted with their purse; more than 130 shareholders bought into the venture, including St. Catherine's Church, who regard the hub as fulfilling an important social function.

Many pubs have been lost in the last decade nationally, but the trend has bucked and village pubs are increasingly being rescued through the local ownership models promoted by charitable organisations such as the Plunkett Foundation.

The new and improved Bluebell Community Hub



The project

A group of Cocking residents formed the Blue Bell Community Hub Benefit Society after taking advice from the Plunkett Foundation on the acquisition, development and running of a local hub amenity. The need arose due to the imminent, permanent loss of the local pub/restaurant through application for change of use of the premises bought by a developer. Having established public support, the group managed to assemble sufficient funds to purchase the property for £470,000 in April 2019, five months after the group was formed.

Phase 2 of the project was the refurbishment at a cost of approximately £140,000. The main works were completed in November 2019 and the hub opened to the public in December 2019. The overhaul of outside spaces and exterior decoration was carried out in the spring of 2020, delayed slightly due to the weather, cash flow issues and a lack of timely grant funding available. The exterior cost an additional £50,000. The hub, its kitchen and rooms were kitted out at a cost of £43,000.

Overall, £198,000 of grants were obtained from various local and national bodies including a £35,000 grant from South Downs National Park Authority. Community shareholding is at £113,000, with private donations of £43,000 and fundraising yielding £13,000 to date. The remaining cost was raised through a combination of corporate, bank and private loans. Fundraising will continue to meet some of the projects debts and to provide additional facilities.

The project has achieved its aims of securing the Blue Bell hub as a community amenity, fully owned by the community, and as a true asset to Cocking and surrounding villages. The hub provides local employment and is an outlet for local produce.

“The resurrection of the Blue Bell prevented Cocking becoming a place where you just pass through with no more than a row of houses”

Philip Jackson, Community Benefit Society President

The outcome

By preventing the conversion of the Blue Bell pub building into residential properties, the Blue Bell Community Benefit Society has conserved the character of the building and safeguarded its purpose. It is now a distinctive well-looked-after building prominently set in the heart of the conservation area of the village with its unmistakable character as a hub open for all enhancing the streetscape and acting as an anchor for the community adding new vibrancy and community involvement.

The Blue Bell is ideally situated at the foot of the South Downs for access to the South Downs Way and soon the extended Centurion Way. The hub now provides accommodation, meals and refreshments particularly geared to walkers and cyclists with its dedicated cycling repair and cleaning station and bike racks; the number of fine walking and cycling circuits in the immediate area is almost endless. There is a bus stop outside the Blue Bell for the frequent 60 service running between Midhurst and Chichester which, other than providing very convenient access to sustainably explore what is on offer in Midhurst, has stops at the South Downs Way, The Weald and Downland Living Museum and West Dean College and Gardens - all providing easy access. Goodwood House, racecourse and motoring circuit are also nearby.

Full community engagement is expected to thrive with weekly coffee mornings for the elderly, monthly lunch club for the over 65s organised by the local church, regular quiz evenings, art clubs, after-school meets and live music folk groups. As a fundraiser, the Society will also make the very successful Cocking Garden Event an annual date on the calendar.

The South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan (PMP) 2020–25 sets out a shared vision for how we all would like the National Park to be in the future. It includes 10 long-term outcomes, and provides a framework for communities, landowners, charities, businesses and public bodies to work together to make this vision and these outcomes a reality.

This project successfully achieved the following PMP outcomes:

- Outcome 1. Landscape and natural beauty
- Outcome 4. Arts and heritage
- Outcome 5. Outstanding experiences
- Outcome 7. Health and wellbeing
- Outcome 9. Great places to live
- Outcome 10. Great places to work

The future

The Blue Bell Community Hub project is a prime example of how a small community can rise to the challenge to save a central amenity for the benefit of all in the area.

The setting up of a Community Benefit Society, with shareholding by its members, has delivered buy-in and has allowed the project to be grounded on a solid financial footing for the long-term. The delivery of an amenity for both community and visitors alike, is overseen by a diverse highly committed Steering Committee.

The task now is to start again after the severe disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic with fresh impetus to grow the business, develop more community events, house an SDNPA Gateway, with helpful visitor information, and make the Blue Bell the place to be.

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