

Levens Community Project – Update March 2021

With building plots at Cotes and Church Road now on the market, the Community Project has entered a new phase and the following is an update on progress.

The twin aims of the Project, identified from within the local community itself, are to build a new village hall and to provide affordable housing for local residents. The framework for this initiative is a Joint Venture Agreement signed by the Parish Council, Levens Charity and the Institute Charity (now the Levens Village Hall Charity) which commits each entity to work together to deliver the Project. Secured planning consents allow for four affordable houses to be built in a terrace at Underhill and a new village hall on Lowgate. When the latter is complete it will be handed over to the Village Hall Charity and the old Institute will be released for redevelopment as three affordable flats. The affordable properties will be owned and rented out by Levens Charity. All this is possible because Levens Parish Council in its own right and as Trustee of Levens Charity is fortunate in owning several plots of land within the village. Fundamental to the success of the Project is the sale of some of these (on which planning consents for full-value housing have been secured) to private developers. Sizergh Fell Quarry was sold in November 2019 and plots at Cotes and Church Road are now on the market. The proceeds of sale from these, supported by external funding in the form of grants, will generate the funds necessary for the new village hall and the affordable housing (which will deliver a long-term return to the village through rents and housing for local people). The Project has been constructed as a cost neutral initiative, meaning that costs will be met by funds raised from the sale of land and external grants, with no financial impact on the day to day finances of the Parish Council and therefore the Precept.

Sizergh Fell Quarry was sold for £750,000 and the three plots at Cotes and the three at Church Road are valued in the region of £1million, so a prudent combined estimate of income from Parish land might be put at £1.7million. The pre-Covid combined estimate to build the affordables and the new village hall, based on a cost per square foot, was £2.3million. It is expected, however that these costs will have increased and more accurate costs will not be known until tenders are received from contractors. The Project Architect, Tony Hills is preparing detailed tender packs: that for the four houses at Underhill is to be issued soon and that for the new village hall is currently being finalised and will be sent out to contractors when plots at Cotes and Church Hill are largely sold.

Supporting the income from the sale of Parish land are funds from external Agencies and primarily from those who support the Project because of its commitment to build affordable housing. Much work, and therefore cost to the Project has already been completed. Awards for All and the old Homes and Communities Agency provided nearly £50,000 which was applied towards feasibility, site surveys, design and planning costs, whilst SLDC has made important contributions from its Locally Important Projects fund and Members' Budget totalling nearly £45,000. £40,000 of this was for the excavation of the new village hall site which is now nearly 95% complete – work which itself released a large quantity of good quality building stone, some of which has already been sold for £47,500. Some of this income has funded a structural engineer who is currently designing boundary retaining walls on this site. Work based on his drawings will be completed prior to construction of the main building using stone on site and will be funded by the sale of the remaining stone. SLDC also contributed to the costs of replacing the village allotments from Church Hill and Underhill with ten purpose built new

allotments at the Kitchen Gardens rented from Levens Hall at a neutral cost. These are all currently occupied with a waiting list.

The most significant source of external funding however has come from the Government-backed Community Led Housing Fund from Homes England and administered by SLDC which is supporting the construction of the affordable properties. It has provided nearly £100,000 to pre-construction costs (Capacity Grant) mainly to cover professional fees. In addition and from the same source, a recently completed Funding Agreement has made available up to £668,000 for infrastructure work (£318,000) and building costs (£350,000). Some final legal details, including the registration of a Legal Charge as a requirement of the Funding Agreement are being completed, after which work will commence on the Underhill site. Following a competitive tendering exercise, Tim Thacker has been awarded the Infrastructure contract at Underhill which includes creating the right levels using fill from the new village hall site, building a retaining wall which is to be stone faced, digging the trenches for the services and moving the main sewer pipe. This latter piece of work is being done under an Agreement with United Utilities which will be completed as soon as the Legal Charge is registered.

In high-level terms therefore we may estimate a revised Project cost of say £2.4million (to be confirmed), against which there is provisional income of £2.5million (Sizergh Fell Quarry - £750,000; a prudent estimate from the sale of building plots - £950,000; funding from the Community Led Housing Fund - £668,000 and grants already received of over £185,000 - which can be offset against the overall cost estimate). This does not take account of additional income from the sale of stone or grants from other external funders. The Project is clear that the availability of external funding is for specific purposes so, for instance, grants from the Community Led Housing Fund cannot be used for the costs of the village hall – there is no single large pot of money that can be used for any purpose. As a backup if required, the Project has also considered the possibility of selling up to 50% equity in each of the four houses at Underhill or taking low interest loans available to the PC for projects exactly like this. The affordable homes will bring in around £25-£30,000 in rents per annum to the Charity, the majority of which will be used for the benefit of people of Levens.

The Project is managed by Levens Parish Council, but in formal partnership with others (as seen in the Joint Venture Agreement) and in conjunction with external funders. Most of its work however is processed by volunteer representatives from the community through either the Levens Community Project Working Group, which is mainly concerned with matters relating to the new village hall, or the LCP Advisory Panel which takes a wider view of the Project as a whole and advises the Parish Council on project management matters. The Parish Council could not run this Project without the input from these two groups or from its Architect, Tony Hills and it extends its thanks to all those involved as well as to the funding bodies supporting this Project.

This piece has inevitably been only a snapshot of the Project and space restricts a more detailed review of both finance and design matters. Of particular interest to many will be the proposed designs and layout of the new village hall. The large graphic panels on the fencing around the site provide a good impression on the intended design. The Parish Council, however, is currently reviewing its page on the village website and a revised layout is under construction. This will make it much easier to navigate to areas which will be devoted to

clearer and more up to date information on various aspects of its activity. For the Project, more detailed plans, financial data and updates on progress will be posted and kept updated.

As the Project moves towards construction, it is hoped that this article provides a broad background to the current position and that the website will keep residents updated with new developments.