

The Evolution of Town Farm Community Stable

In mid-2002 an idea surfaced to secure the derelict barn on the Town Farm site as a community resource on behalf of the Parish of North Curry by means of an agreement drawn up under the terms of Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

Once North Curry Parish Council (NCPC) had agreed in principle to accept the barn from the developer it then had to negotiate acceptable terms in the Section 106 Agreement to ensure it was not left with burdensome obligations if the project failed to take off for whatever reason. In August 2003 it was agreed the Barn would be transferred to NCPC for development on the understanding that if the development was not commenced within two years the barn would revert to the developer and NCPC would receive a cash consideration for community benefit.



From this

The Council faced three key questions:

1. What type of development would be in the best interests of the community at large ?
2. What would it cost and how would it be funded ?
3. How would the project be managed during both the initial start up and ongoing running phases ?

The Council took the view that the Parish was already well-endowed with community facilities in terms of an excellent

village hall and playing field pavilion. However an appraisal undertaken in 2002 showed a strong desire for additional retail facilities as an extract from the Appraisal Report of the time clearly identifies:

60 respondents (15.4%) expressed a desire for retention or improvement of shopping facilities. One main theme was the retention of Hutchings and newspaper deliveries. This is not surprising in view of the topicality of the issue at the time of the survey. The other main theme was the retention of the Post Office, pub and other facilities. Some respondents sought additional facilities with hairdresser, baker, butcher, fresh fruit and vegetable store, fish van, café and takeaway amongst the suggestions.

The village had lost a large number of retail outlets over recent years due to the financial attractiveness of closing them and converting them into private residential homes. After lengthy debate NCPC concluded that the best use of the barn would be to dedicate a small part to a Parish Council office, as the Village Hall was anxious to reclaim the area it currently let to the Council for that purpose, and to dedicate the remainder of the building to provide potential retail facilities at a sensible commercial rent. It was also agreed to try and convert the loft area for use as storage for village archives and memorabilia.

Early estimates put the project cost at up to £100,000. Funding the project entirely through the Precept (Council Tax) was seen as inappropriate as the Council was anxious to avoid accusations of subsidising commercial activities. A detailed assessment of available grants was undertaken and the only possibility which offered funding on the necessary scale was the DEFRA Rural Enterprise Scheme which had been set up to encourage diversification in farming districts. DEFRA agreed they would consider an application although it was difficult to get precise guidance on the prospective scale and proportion of any grant.

NCPC then initiated a formal tendering process based on a rough outline specification of requirements from which it became clear that the cost would probably be closer to £150,000. It now needed to seek planning consent for which purpose a more detailed design was necessary. A small grant was secured from LAMP (Levels and Moors Partnership) which was partially used to fund an architect to provide an outline design. Planning consent was applied for and granted for both Change of Use and the construction work.

The establishment of a separate legal entity independent of NCPC to manage the project was a pre-condition of DEFRA funding. It was agreed to set up a Company Limited by Guarantee and North Curry Community Ltd (NCCL) was formed as a vehicle for submitting the grant application and hopefully ultimately running the project. NCPC then granted a 25 year lease of the barn to NCCL. The project was re-named Town Farm Community Stable.

The final design comprised a Parish Office and Archive Store plus two Commercial Units. One Commercial Unit was leased to Angela Few, a local resident who wished to establish a hairdressing business. The other Unit was leased to a local volunteer group, North Curry Community Coffee Shop, whose name is self-explanatory.

In May 2005 DEFRA agreed to 80% grant funding of the building project cost leaving the balance to be funded by means of a loan. Prior to the need for a separate legal entity to manage the business being identified, the intention had been for NCPC to run the business and to raise a loan at very modest rates from the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) to cover the balance of the building costs and working capital. The DEFRA deal precluded PWLB funding so NCCL was forced to secure a commercial loan from Charity Bank at a somewhat higher fixed rate of 6% per annum. This unforeseen additional cost was outside the original budget and the shortfall of around £3,000 p.a. had to be made up by NCPC, initially by a rent rebate and latterly by an annual grant.

With a design, planning consent, funding, tenants and a management company all in place all that remained was to let the construction contract and finish the job!! Not as easy as that, but the project was completed in April 2006 only a month behind schedule. Thereafter it has continued to run successfully providing the community with Parish Office and Archive Store plus two Commercial Units as you see it today.



..... to this !!!!

In 2015 NCPC agreed to purchase the residual term of the 25 year Lease from NCCL for a consideration equal to the outstanding balance of the NCCL loan with Charity Bank which was then redeemed. The Council then set up Town Farm Stable Sub-committee for the purpose of managing the Stable and NCCL directors set about winding up the Company which had now served it's purpose. The DEFRA obligation for a separate company had been extinguished after 5 years operation.

The community is now free of debt relating to this project and owns a valuable asset in the village centre which has been acquired at negligible cost. It owns a permanent office and archive and has two revenue-generating commercial facilities giving both amenity and financial benefit potentially in perpetuity.