

Minutes from Public Meeting held on 15 September 2023 at Cockfield Village Hall

Speakers: Sarah Fletcher, David Lewsey, Alan Ramsey and Ria Crosby from Felsham and Gedding Community Store

Minute taker Pauline Smalinsky

Sarah Fletcher introduced the group presenting to the 60 plus attendees at the meeting.

The Cockfield Post Office and Village Store is to become a community-run venture due to the retirement of Ralph and Barbara Turner. A small group has engaged with Barbara and Ralph with a view to taking on the running of the shop staffed by volunteers. The focus of the meeting was to provide information, engage with the community and recruit volunteers.

Background on the group and its regulation by the FCA.

The group is an extension of The Cockfield Village Group Limited (CVG). CVG was established to buy the Plough and Fleece public house. Unfortunately, there has been little progress on this other than maintaining the status of the pub as an Asset of Community Value that gives the pub protection from becoming a residential property through a change of use. There is a 6-month moratorium to prevent the sale going to a buyer other than a Community Group. The current listed price is high and considered overpriced for a pub that has been closed for over 3 years there is also the important point of how to raise the funds to purchase.

There was a question regarding the running of the pub should it become available. At present, there are no plans other than for each aspect ie pub, shop, and post office to be managed individually under the umbrella of the CVG. CVG was initially a limited company but has now converted to a Community Benefit Society and is registered with and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority.

A Community Benefit Society is a legal entity, allowing access to grant funding and will be owned by the community rather than individual ownership. Annual accounts, VAT registration and a license to sell alcohol are necessary in order to take on the shop. A CBS is a vehicle permitting us to do this.

It is a non-profit organisation in that profit, when it is made, will be put back into the shop rather than paid to shareholders as a dividend. A prospectus offering the opportunity to buy share shares in CVG will be issued soon. All funds raised will be used to support the initiatives of CVG and initially used to fund any costs associated with taking on the shop. If all the criteria are met for the share offering there is an opportunity to receive some personal tax benefits associated with the share purchase. There are no paid directors.

Opening date

Cockfield Post Office and Village Store will be supported by volunteers from 6 November for the shop and from 1 November the Post Office will have a new Postmaster supported by trained volunteers.

The shop premises will be owned by Barbara and Ralph with rent, to be negotiated, paid by CVG. Barbara and Ralph are happy for this arrangement to continue until suitable alternative accommodation becomes available.

Set up costs

David Lewsey, CVG Treasurer explained that there would be approximately 10K of set-up costs primarily for the purchase of existing stock, and a new till and fridges. Some working capital (cash) will be required for any orders in the first months until takings support further purchases. There is a requirement to create welfare facilities for the staff and a WC that will also cost approximately £7,500.

Grant funding

None applied for at present. Once the project becomes a reality, the group can access various funding streams for community projects eg The Plunkett Foundation and Co-op Society, District and County councils.

The Coop Bank can fund up to £1000. We are not yet at the right stage to approach organisations as we need to have volunteers signed up before anything else can be actioned. Tentative enquiries have been made.

Charitable status is not possible.

Requests will be made to both the Community and Parish Councils for support in getting the venture up and running.

Fund Raising

As mentioned above, shares will be offered out to the community. Ria from Felsham advised that making a profit for some years is not usual. Felsham stores are only just turning a profit after 4 years trading. There will be no return on shares but investors will be investing in their community. She said that some residents of Felsham had made personal long-term loans to the shop. Procedures are being developed to raise funds for the Plough and Fleece project and can be tweaked to raise funds for the community shop. A GoFundMe page will also be set up in the interim and any funds raised would be converted to shares if the share issue goes ahead.

Managing the shop

Sarah Fletcher estimates that we need between 25 and 30 volunteers for the shop as a minimum.

There is a bar code in our advert in Green Links giving access to a registration form.

Initially, a paper timetable will be drawn up with volunteers slotted into preferred roles and times.

This will evolve into a volunteer-run WhatsAapp group to ensure shifts are covered. Split shifts will also be available. The volunteer roles will range from collecting bread from Lavenham, taking deliveries to people and working in the shop to cleaning. There will be no hierarchy of volunteers; everyone involved will be in it together.

It is envisaged that there will be always one person in the shop and one in the Post Office. If volunteers specifically ask to work with a partner, it can be arranged but space is limited so could be a bit too cosy.

Purchasing supplies

We may have trouble getting credit from suppliers in the early days. Felsham and Rattlesden communities have offered to order for us if this is the case. Ria said that Felsham was managed this way for some time, the shop now runs independently.

What happens if the shop runs at a deficit?

If this did happen, further requests for funding would be made and as a last resort loans could be applied for to allow the shop to continue trading or it would be closed.

Managing the Post Office

Sarah informed the meeting that the 4 volunteer roles for the afternoons and Saturday mornings have been filled. There is a paid vacancy for a Postmaster which we are in the process of filling. All staff voluntary and paid will be vetted by and undertake training from the Post Office. The Post Office is cost-neutral; there is no income from it for the shop and the Post Master will be self-employed.

Other roles that need to be filled

Sarah asked for help in the following areas:

- *Secretary
- *Fundraiser
- *IT expertise
- *Web Site developer
- *Health and Safety in the workplace

We would like to thank Ria for her advice and words of encouragement. She told us that community spirit had grown as a result of the shop opening and people taking a personal interest. She said the shop had evolved over time, being shaped by the people who use it. She outlined some benefits of volunteering; meeting people which is good for our mental health, being part of a community and feeling that there is a purpose in life. The Felsham shop's motto is Run by the Community for the Community. A motto we may like to adopt for our own project.