

Case Study

July 2021



ACTion
with communities
in cumbria

Hunsonby Community Centre



*The
refurbished
Hunsonby
Community
Centre*

A Successful Refurbishment in Hunsonby

Hunsonby, Winskill and Little Salkeld are three small neighbouring villages in the Eden Valley a couple of miles from Langwathby just off the A686 road from Penrith to Alston. There are no shops or pubs and the village school closed in the 1970s.

In recent years young people and families have moved into the villages, and there is a wonderful play area and open-air swimming pool, both run by the local community.

Background

When the school closed the building became a Community Centre and served the villages well for many years. With the passage of time, it was clear that the Centre needed a major upgrade. The committee who had run it so well for so long felt the time was right to hand over to a new generation to lead the next stage of development. Thus it was that a new committee was elected in 2016. Hellen Aitken from ACT attended the very first meeting of the new committee and explained some of the possible options and the importance of consulting the local community.

The Project

Projects are principally about people, not buildings. There were two initial objectives: ensure good governance, and ask local residents what they wanted from their Community Centre. A new committee had already been formed, with a good mix of experience and knowledge. With advice from ACT it was decided that the Community Centre charity would become a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO), prior to what was expected to be a significant refurbishment. The CIO was registered with the Charity Commission and a local solicitor used to complete the necessary transfer.

Residents were invited to a consultation event and used Post It notes to record their views and suggestions. From this a brief was prepared to discuss with architects. One of the main discussion points was the size of the kitchen, with options marked on the floor with tape to help people decide (it was clear a big kitchen was essential).

At every stage professional advice was sought. Initial advice is usually free and the project also benefitted from 'pro-bono' work. ACT were very supportive and have excellent information for community buildings. Some limited funds were available, enough to do some preliminary work with the chosen architect. This was particularly important because it gave an idea of the overall project cost, essential for fundraising.

Ideas were developed and presented to the community for feedback, combined with an exhibition about the old school, which proved to be very popular. It was also the beginning of the fundraising campaign. The project was going to cost £300,000.

*The spacious
new entrance, as
seen from inside.*



While local fundraising is unlikely to provide any large sum needed, it demonstrates commitment and gets everyone involved. So local fundraising ran alongside applications to a wide variety of grant making bodies. One of the trustees led on fundraising, but everyone played their part. Once the first significant grant had been achieved, it became easier, with a growing confidence that the trustees were committed to achieving the target. Funders back projects, but they also back people and want to see the commitment and effort put into fundraising.

In parallel with fundraising, detailed designs were developed, and a builder selected by competitive tender. It was very satisfying that a local builder won the tender and proved to be an excellent partner. Another important decision was to apply for Hallmark, the national quality award for village halls, administered by ACT. This was an excellent basis for ensuring quality processes and procedures for how the new Centre would be run, and it again demonstrated the trustees' commitment to doing this professionally, which helped with grant funders.

A new website and Facebook group enabled updates for both the local community and partners.

What has been achieved?

The target of £300,000 was achieved with several large grants (National Lottery, Sport England, ACRE, Cumbria Waste) and many smaller ones. Building work started in October 2019 and was due to take twelve months. Asbestos was found which caused a short delay (and extra cost, but that's why contingency is important), but this was nothing compared with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. To cut a very long story short, lockdowns and material shortages delayed the project but practical completion was achieved in March 2021, only six months late.

Of course, the Centre cannot be used as planned until restrictions are lifted, but a series of open days for the community have been held with universal delight and approval.

The Learning

People get things done and funders back people. Starting with good governance, seeking advice from anyone willing to offer it, especially ACT, and putting in place important foundations (forming the CIO, website, Facebook page, achieving Hallmark) all contributed to the success of the project. It was important to listen to the local community, because this is their project, and to give feedback. Funders were very supportive, it is important to keep them informed of progress, to listen to their advice, and use their resources.

Projects are always partnerships and the results depend on choosing the right partners: architects, builders, lawyers, advisors, and many others who make a contribution.



Receiving Hallmark award L-R Hellen Aitken (ACT), Rachel Forster, Bryan Gray

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Refurbished interior



Want to know more?

For more information please visit:
hunsonbycommunitycentre.uk