

Cranbrook Community Centre

In the year 2000, a Millennium Trust was set up to raise £100,000 to build a community centre.

About £15,000 was raised over the next 3 years. Anita Stemp and Carol Gower started running coach and theatre trips which have now grown into a small industry, giving a great deal of pleasure to thousands of people over the last 19 years, with the proceeds intended for the Community Centre.

Fund raising stalled because no site had been identified, it turned out that the Ball field cannot be built on due to covenants, and at the time other land was not available.

The need for a community centre was written into the Parish Plan of 2002

The search for land continued and there were several false starts – beside the Coop Store, behind the Coop store, on a rebuilt library site, and then the question of the redundant Council offices arose.

In 2008 TWBC decided to shut their local office in Cranbrook, which had previously been the offices of the Rural District Council. It was used by Age Concern to get up to 50 elderly people together each week for lunch and a chat. There were also offices where they could see a chiropractor and Citizen's Advice, and other services. All of this stopped in 2008.

As the result of the uproar, TWBC then employed a consultant, Urban Practitioners, to help define what should go in a community centre, how it might work, size of rooms, who would use it etc and also where it should go.

Wilkes Field was identified by the report as the best site, being of a good size and central, but it was not available.

In February 2011, there were several public meetings, consultations and a report on a way forward produced. The Millennium Trust planned to have a multi-use building on the TWBC site with part rented offices, part community centre, to make a stand alone financially independent operation.

TWBC sold the Council offices site for about £2 million and Horsley Place was built by McCarthy Stone. The opportunity had disappeared.

TWBC / KCC suggested a redevelopment of the library site in 2009, but this was shelved by KCC. The community parts of the building were on the first floor –so not a viable alternative.

Sometime around this, Cranbrook Engineering and Wilkes Field were both purchased by Guy Johnson. Cranbrook Engineering buildings were lent to the Hospice in the Weald while planning permission was gained for a redevelopment of the workshops and frontage on Stone street. Wilkes field was not included in the plan.

The Community Centre group, as the Millenium Fund group had renamed itself for clarity of purpose, approached Mr Johnson to ask if he would give them a piece of land for community use. A proposition was developed for Mr Johnson to give a part of Wilkes Field to the Community while he developed housing on the remains of the field.

This proposal was evaluated by TWBC and agreed in principle.

At last a piece of land was going to become available in the centre of town, between the 2 main car parks, and level walking from the High Street and immediately across the bridge from the Frythe.

The Millenium Trust decided to approach a local design and build firm, Direct Line Construction, to draw up a potential building to cover the site, with the criteria of

Affordability

Space availability, based on the research output from Urban Practitioners

Ability to rearrange room layouts in the future (hence a steel frame)

Low running cost – maintenance and power requirements.

The Millennium Trust fund paid for these plans.

These plans came in at £1.9 million for 1500 square metres in a modern building with an extensive roof shaped like an eyelid.

These plans were not liked by the planners and some members of the Parish Council.

In the December 2014, the Parish Council passed a resolution to build a community centre, and the development responsibility was taken over by the parish as Mr Johnson stated that he was gifting the land to the Parish Council, NOT the Community Centre group. Obviously the cost of acquiring land and building a new centre had become prohibitive for a non-aligned group of locals with no political clout.

Francis Rook, as chair of the Parish Council took over the project.

The Parish passed a further resolution on 22 October 2015 to build a community centre, and this has been the mandate under which the next stage of the project has been undertaken.

A decision had been taken NOT to 'design and build' as the TWBC planners wanted an 'iconic' building. An architects brief was drawn up, a 'beauty parade before the whole council chose the architects Taylor Roberts.

They worked closely with TWBC planners and the Parish to deliver plans for a building of 1200 square metres, with a build cost of £4.3 million.

These plans were submitted along with Mr Johnson's housing plan and passed by the planning committee in TWBC on 7 October 2016.

At last we seemed to have a piece of land AND planning permission – the 2 key requirements to start to raise funds.

A parish wide survey was held to ask if parishioners wanted to take out a loan to pay for the construction. A number of councillors actively discouraged approval by anonymously leafletting many addresses, and the survey showed a lack of support for a loan from the Public Works Loan Board. The financial terms were 2.6% fixed for 50 years.

This meant that whatever happened, the plans would need to be value engineered or simplified to make them more affordable, perhaps requiring new planning permission.

The issue of access then became germane to the project. The land is owned by TWBC, but leased to the Parish Council. HOWEVER a clause in the agreement between TWBC and the COOP gives the Coop control over the rights of access across the car park. This meant that the Coop became engaged in the legal issues, and originally sought considerable compensation to agree access for the housing and community centre.

The current situation is that the Parish have agreed to and refurbished parts of the car park for the Coop, but the final papers are still not signed.

This means none of the legal contracts between the Coop, TWBC, the Parish and Mr Johnson have yet been signed. This struggle for legal agreement has been going on for 5 years, and is **the reason that the development has stalled**.

However, during this time more developments have taken place.

TWBC have made the construction of 4 community centres across the Borough a key priority and have pledged (but not in writing) £400,000 toward the Cranbrook building.

The KCC library have expressed an interest in taking 200 sq metres, but again, not in writing.

Kim Fletcher has been working with the GPs for 4 years to consider a new surgery which would house more GPs and some (as yet undefined) clinical spaces. The local CCG (Clinical Commissioning Group) are interested and have commissioned a scoping document to see what could be fitted on a single floor on this site. The Parish are paying 50% of this study, £1750.

The surgery would be self contained with no interface with the community centre.

Given the topography of the site, and the fact the Parish owns the land beside the donated Johnson land, we will identify how the Community Centre will fit with the surgery if the CCG agree to take the project further.

While the NHS will NOT be contributing directly to the Community centre, we could share certain parts of the construction costs, for example a common roof and low carbon energy system.

The Parish are investigating purchasing the Tanyard dental surgery that is currently disused and semi derelict. This would give valuable access through the Tanyard car park, direct to the community centre on the lower ground floor, plus dedicated parking.

Disabled parking is planned on the site of current public WCs and also on the existing site of the recycling bins. Some of these bins are planned to be removed in autumn 2019 when the new refuse collection contract starts.

The post of construction manager will NOT be advertised until the legal agreements are finalised and the position of the NHS is clear, as we do not know what their specification will be. This is the same situation for the Architect.

The project will need an input of energy from the Parish and the Community once the contracts are signed.

In order to harness this, a new delivery committee will be required, made up of councillors and local professionals, with a designated professional manager doing the day to day work.

The current efforts are driven by a committee with members from TWBC senior staff Paul Taylor and Denise Haylett, and Mrs Mackonochie, member responsible for communities, the Parish (Bridget Veitch and Kim Fletcher), Mr Johnson's representative David Rivers, KCC Libraries and Jonathan White, who is working on other centres for TWBC and KCC.

The aim is that the **Parish** will control the project through the project manager, rather than TWBC. This is because Southborough and Paddock Wood residents are dissatisfied with compromises made on their behalf by TWBC / KCC for their community centres.

All the elements are circling, and it seems a final push is required to get them all together and finally make this happen.

A last word – 'Build it and they will come' is the mantra I have used over the last 20 years I have been involved in the project.

It is too easy to be jaded and pessimistic, sucking the life out of the enthusiasm to create something that brings our community together.

I am all for realism, but 'there is a way' if we look for it.

Kim Fletcher

July 17 2019