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The ABBEY

Building Community Power through
Community Asset Transfer

Staveley
Community Trust

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FACEBOOK



The Abbey

The Abbey Care Home is situated at the very heart of the village of Staveley and until it closed in 2020 it was central to the life of the community. Local residents talk about their loved ones who spent their last years there and tell of people who knocked on the door to ask for a place. To many it removed the fear of what was going to happen to them in their old age, allowing them to access care and support locally, and stay in familiar surroundings close to family and friends.

Prior to closure, a consultation was carried out by the owners, Cumbria County Council, which found that residents overwhelmingly wanted housing and care for older people to be retained. A petition against the closure, led by the care home staff, was signed by over 2,000 people. Despite the strong feeling in the community the Council closed the Abbey and moved the last resident to a private care home in Kendal, where she died a few days later.

This case study shares the journey that we have been on in Staveley to secure the long-term future of the building for our local community, and to meet the needs of our growing elderly population. It outlines the innovative proposal we developed for the future of this iconic site and the process we went through in submitting our Community Asset Transfer (CAT) request to try to secure it. It really has been an emotional roller-coaster and sadly we have not yet seen the outcome we wanted. But we have learnt a lot along the way and the case study contains insights for other communities looking at CAT and for the public bodies with the power to agree to them.



The backdrop – how we fit into a bigger picture

“Social care providers around the county report increasing difficulty recruiting and retaining staff in the face of increasing wages in other employment sectors...and the ongoing pressure caused by the pandemic. Best estimates suggest that right now there are over 700 social care job vacancies in Cumbria, at the same time as demand for care is increasing...Such staffing shortages have already led to both temporary and permanent closures of care homes in Cumbria this autumn, and current council data shows the number of people awaiting social care packages at home continuing to rise”, Cumbria County Council [press release](#), 4 November 2021

In Cumbria and in many other areas the [state of social care](#) remains ‘unremittingly grim’. According to Sally Gainsbury from The Nuffield Trust, *“financial pressures as well as repeated failed reforms have left social care services fragile and seen council-funded care packages shrinking with increasing numbers of people shut out from publicly funded care”*. Care England’s chief executive Martin Green has described how *“social care must be seen as an essential part of national infrastructure”*.

Cumbria County Council responded to the problems in social care in their strategy document ‘Reshaping Social Care’. This prioritised offering people care in their own homes and encouraging the private sector to establish extra care and supported living accommodation.

- In South Lakeland District it was [estimated](#) that there would be a shortfall of 500 units of Extra Care housing by 2025 – this included a shortfall of 34 living units in relation to supported accommodation. These figures were based on an assumption that 65% of people placed in residential care and 25% of people in existing Supported Living accommodation would benefit from moving to new Supported Living schemes.
- The [South Lakeland Older Persons’ Housing Strategy](#) set a clear target of delivering 300 extra care housing units by 2025 – with the Kendal rural sub-area [which covers Staveley] predicted to have the highest shortfall of Extra Care units, based on a predicted demand of 170 units by 2025 and little or no supply pipeline.

Cumbria County Council also decided to focus residential care home provision in the largest centres of population: Barrow, Carlisle, Whitehaven, Workington and Ulverston.

In Staveley, we were aware that there was a shortage of extra care housing across South Lakeland and saw an opportunity to ‘save’ the Abbey building, to meet the needs of older local people and help Cumbria County Council to reshape social care – The Abbey would be a rural exemplar, showcasing what local people can do to make their communities more sustainable.

When it became clear that the County Council intended to close The Abbey and could not deliver any of the options preferred by the community, we began discussions with them about Community Asset Transfer.

“Community Asset Transfer (CAT) is one of the ways in which the corporate priorities can be achieved. The assets that the Council owns in local communities may play an important part in enabling voluntary groups to come together to offer communities a range of activities and services that benefit the social and economic wellbeing of an area. CAT’s can provide an opportunity to enable communities to help themselves”, Cumbria County Council [Property Disposal Policy](#) 2016, page 4.

While we were working on the Community Asset Transfer with Cumbria County Council, Local Government Reorganisation plans (LGR) were developing in Cumbria. This would ultimately abolish both County and District Authorities. In April 2023 the new Westmorland and Furness Council became the strategic planning authority for Staveley. LGR disrupted the whole CAT process for us, but we hoped that our vision for the Abbey would be recognised as complimentary – delivering the stated visions of both outgoing and incoming authorities.

“The transformation of services will potentially take five years. We will need to prioritise those areas that need our focus earlier than others, and clearly adult and children’s social care are some of those priority areas”, Councillor Jonathan Brook, leader of Westmorland and Furness Council.

The local context – come to Staveley

Staveley is a village 4 miles northwest of Kendal, situated within the Lake District National Park. Staveley with Ings Parish has 1,700 residents comprising 790 households across three neighbourhoods (Nether Staveley, Over Staveley and Hugill). The Parish has a primary school, GP surgery, pharmacy, post office (currently closed), 2 pubs, 2 breweries, a recreation ground, railway station and 60+ businesses serving residents and visitors. The proportion of older people living in the Parish at 23.8% is above the national average of 18.7% (Nomis 2021 population estimates).

The Abbey building is in a focal point in Staveley and has been used to provide support to local residents since it was purchased in 1890 for use as a Children's Home by Kendal Guardians. In 1956 it was converted into a home for older residents run by the local authority as part of its adult social care provision. It comprises the original Abbey building with cellar and attic, a stone extension built in the 1930s, an extension built in 1998, a garden, and a car park.

"If you talk to anybody in the locality they say that Staveley with Ings is a great place to live with an active and vibrant community. In the parish there is so much enthusiasm and passion and so much to be celebrated, captured and developed...But things change...[we] need to plan ahead if we are to look after the things we value, develop new initiatives and respond to pressures", Staveley with Ings Community Plan (Action Plan), page 1.



How did it begin?

Between 2018 and 2020 the Parish Council engaged residents in reviewing the 2013 Parish Plan and developing a new Community Plan. This included face-to-face meetings, paper and online surveys, focus groups, and online meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. Residents highlighted the community spirit and the mixed demographic in the villages. The new Staveley with Ings Community Plan (2021-2031) was published in 2021. It included a Priority Action Plan with 16 actions, including one focussed specifically on the Abbey.

Under the heading 'Rethinking the Abbey care home site' the community plan identified steps to find out what the community wanted for the Abbey site, and aimed to put that in place. We would do this by:

- (i) Supporting community engagement and discussions about the future of The Abbey; and
- (ii) establishing a steering group and developing plans with the community to shape the New Abbey.

This led to the formation of The Abbey Development Group, a group of local residents tasked with exploring how The Abbey building and land could continue to meet the needs of older people in the local community.

"There is real concern about the future of The Abbey Care Home Site and how we can continue to care for our elderly residents, close to home", Staveley with Ings Community Plan (Action Plan), page 5.

"The community should work with our partners in the County Council to replace the Abbey with a fully integrated community led provision in Staveley. In this vision The Abbey would form a hub in partnership with the doctor's surgery and others. It would provide a range of provision for older and vulnerable residents...The Abbey could provide a venue and other support to groups providing social opportunities...we believe the village has the capacity to be actively involved in creating genuinely community led provision in partnership with the County Council and local NHS services", resident feedback on Staveley with Ings Community Plan.

Alongside this, between September and November 2019, Cumbria County Council [consulted](#) the public on a proposal to close The Abbey as a care home and support the community's aspirations to provide care in the local area.

Three options for the future development of the site were presented:

1. A mixture of extra-care housing (including a dedicated team onsite to provide support) and a 10 bed residential care unit.
2. Affordable residential homes plus a number of 'care ready' elderly persons homes – with potential for a care hub facility to train support staff who would be available to provide 24 hour support to residents.
3. Sale of the site for mixed provision residential homes, with the capital income being utilised for other council services.

88% of respondents to the consultation supported option 1. A 2,000 signature petition led by staff at The Abbey was also presented to Cumbria County Council highlighting the depth of local support for retaining local care provision.

The 3 options presented were all dependent on Cumbria County Council undertaking further analysis, market testing and planning. Sadly, in January 2020, the Council closed The Abbey. In March 2021 the Council decided option 1 was unviable, and in failing to identify any other options, the authority approached the Parish Council and community leaders to see if they could put forward a feasible proposal for the future of the site.

The Abbey Development Group was a natural conduit for initial discussions about what the community most wanted, and how a Community Asset Transfer (CAT) could reclaim the Abbey for the community and transform it to meet local needs.

What did the local community want?

“When the time came people looked forward to going into The Abbey because they knew they would be looked after... we don’t want people going miles away to be looked after. And if their family hasn’t got transport then they struggle to travel miles and miles to see their loved ones”, Local resident

The Parish Council and local community had already started developing new and innovative proposals for the site prior to Cumbria County Council consulting on and closing the care home; but the County Council approaching the local community to suggest the way forward, provided new impetus.

Extensive community consultation took place. This included:

- Residents surveys completed in April and May 2021 (digital and paper copies) which found:
 - 98% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: ‘when their care needs can no longer be met at home, people in Staveley with lngs should be able to access the additional care they need in the parish, for as long as possible’.
 - 89% of respondents wanted to prioritise housing for older people as part of the project – with support for extra care housing (87%) and sheltered accommodation (76%).
 - 92% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Abbey building should be secured for the community and run on a not-for-profit basis.
- A series of public meetings were held – including a COVID-19 compliant face-to-face session in June 2021 – which generated 40 named resident contacts who wanted to actively support the project and were willing to help.
- In 2022, meetings with individuals and groups of residents at twice weekly ‘Warm Spaces’ sessions in the village.
- Consultation with school children which indicated their desire for affordable housing and local employment, as well as care for older people at the Abbey.

The Abbey became a standing agenda item at every Parish Council meeting which was also



attended by elected members from South Lakeland District Council.

One key aim was universally supported throughout the consultation: **that nobody should have to leave their community for the social care they need.**

“As we get older it is better for most of us to stay in a familiar place where we know people. Nobody should have to leave the area because they are older or need a little help...The Abbey is a significant local landmark which we have been saddened to see decline and eventually close. Since 2019 the community has spoken strongly about a desire to retain local care for elderly people”, local resident.

“The Abbey should remain a care facility for older adults who are local and from the surrounding area”, local resident.

“Community is very important as you get older, being around people who care for you, who know you, and your history is very important”, local resident.

“It would be great to see the Abbey Site developed as an imaginative community hub with a range of services and support”, local resident.

Building on the feedback and interest of the community we

could see that the local priorities were to:

- Support people to ‘age in place’ rather than having to move ‘away from home’.
- Safeguard a community asset that would otherwise be lost, adding to parish services and facilities and placing it into community ownership with local community oversight.
- Be available for use by all residents – including providing housing and employment for local people.
- Delay or prevent older people from needing statutory services – delivering the priorities of Cumbria County Council and Morecombe Bay Health Authority and achieving cashable savings.
- Use smart technology to enhance the quality of life for people living, working and visiting the Abbey.
- Be financially sustainable and self-supporting in the longer-term.



The New Abbey

A working model for the future of The Abbey was developed, with four interdependent components:

1. The Abbey Hub:

a one stop shop or access point to support older people (individually or in groups) to access health and wellbeing services. This enables people to get help early, and to access support easily within the local community. It saves money and it saves people time.

2. The Abbey Apartments:

16 flexible and adaptable rented apartments for local, older people. This will make an important contribution in meeting the shortfall in extra care housing units.

3. A Home from home Apartment:

a four-room apartment to provide step-up, step-down care to allow patients deemed medically fit for discharge to have a phased return from hospital to home. The apartment will also provide respite care and/or palliative care.

4. Accommodation for Carers:

a four-bedroom flat for carers offered at an affordable rent. Offering live-work provision for people employed in social care.



“The New Abbey will become a central point for domiciliary services, specialist support and social activity for people as they get older but do not wish to move, as well as providing accessible apartments for independent living for those who want peace of mind of accessible care and shared facilities... Our proposal for the New Abbey offers a radical, innovative and creative response to support in rural communities. It draws on good practice from across the country and beyond, to create something that is unique. At the heart of it are the older residents themselves and the physical, cognitive, emotional and social challenges they face as they get older. The proposal is based upon the expressed views of residents and they will continue to be involved in shaping developments”, trustee, Staveley Community Trust.

It is these four components taken together, rather than as individual parts, that demonstrates the innovative approach we wanted to take. Only together can they form the basis of a financially viable way forward.

“The information provided looks exciting and the recent implosion of social care in South Lakeland emphasises how fragile this sector is and why there is a desperate need for such accommodation to be available...I am pleased to confirm that I have written to the Chief Executive of Cumbria County Council and the Head of Adult Social Care to share your ideas and to seek positive engagement on this proposal”, Tim Farron MP.

We worked with the Lakeland Housing Trust to develop our proposed Property Release scheme so that when older people moved to the Abbey Apartments they would be supported to let their homes to local families at an affordable rent. This was perhaps the most innovative element of the scheme, allowing it to benefit residents of all ages, preventing the loss of local homes to the holiday and second homes market.



What did we do to support the community to reach their goals?

In addition to local consultation activities, we liaised with a range of potential partners and stakeholders including:

- Cumbria County Council: to gather information about the needs and type of care received by residents at the Abbey, and how many residents were being transferred out of the village to access nursing and care homes.
- Home care providers and care agencies: to understand industry trends, business planning and operational costs over a 3-5 year period.
- Primary and secondary health care providers: to gather data on the needs of older people and service demands and pressures.
- Housing providers: to better understand the demand for housing provision for older people including specialist and supported housing schemes.
- National bodies that support community led initiatives (e.g. Plunkett UK).

Over a 6-month period we worked with local professionals and organisations (mainly pro bono) to:

- Look at the technical feasibility for the New Abbey (e.g. building condition survey, site plans, architects plans, legal) and develop a business plan. Increasing numbers of local people with technical/specialist skills came forward to support us (including architect, building surveyor, primary care practitioners, social care workers, housing specialist).
- Align this technical/business work to the strategic priorities of Cumbria County Council. This included the Commissioning Strategy for Care and Support which aimed to increase the supply of Extra Care and other supported housing and increase the use of 'support at home' services for older people; and the Community Asset Transfer guidance which looked at how, through area planning, buildings can be improved, their use changed, or sold to reinvest money in frontline services.
- Produce a tender to access £267,915 from South Lakeland District Council/Homes England to further support pre-development work, business planning (including stress testing) and fundraising. The grant application for 'Community Led Homes' was approved by the District Council and a contract drawn up and agreed by the Trust.



“We recognised the need for specialist support and expertise to ensure the vision and model were financially viable and that the building and land in question were assets not liabilities”, trustee, Staveley Community Trust.

“Income will be largely from rent and services in the long term, but for start-up costs we have a fundraising plan and have budgeted to borrow for some of the significant financial outlay involved in building renovation”, The New Abbey community proposal, page 5.

We estimated the total build and refurbishment costs, including pre-planning and development fees, taking account of inflation and other national financial pressures (e.g. Brexit – leading to workforce challenges in health and social care, and supply chain issues in housing and construction), would be £3,341,975. This included a sum of £350,000 to secure the site – which Cumbria County Council had the option to give us at less than market value if they supported our plans.

“Our approach to fundraising for this substantial project is both planned and responsive. The timetable for planned applications will be adjusted [but] is based on the working assumption that this decision [by Cumbria County Council] will be made in July 2022 and legally confirmed by September/October 2022. Estimated start on site spring 2023”, The New Abbey community proposal, page 19.

As part of our Community Led Homes grant funding we issued an Invitation to Tender (ITT) for multidisciplinary support to assist us in developing our business case, and so as to evidence the viability and sustainability of our proposal to Cumbria County Council. Three companies responded to the ITT, submitting quotes of around £180,000.

“This grant was to give Staveley Community Trust, as a community group, the confidence and information we needed to have before taking the building on via Community Asset Transfer. Even if the building were given to us for free, we needed to know that we could make a plan for it to be fixable and runnable in a way that we could be sure it would work”, trustee, Staveley Community Trust.

Cumbria County Council requested we submitted our Community Asset Transfer application in September 2021, and we were told to expect a decision in October 2021.



What happened?

Between November and December 2021 Cumbria County Council commissioned a valuation of The Abbey. A valuation and report on the site was prepared by Carigiet Cowen which listed its market value at £800,000 (for hotel class), £300,000 (residential use) or £280,000 (office use). We queried if the Council was leaning towards open market disposal rather than continuing discussions with the local community, but we received no sensible answer.

Following prompts from Staveley Community Trust, in March 2022, and again in October 2022, Cumbria County Council asked for additional information by email. They wanted more detail around capital cost assumptions, operating cost assumptions, care assumptions, and evidence of comparable schemes. We provided what they asked for, and asked for face to face dialogue so we could work together to find the best solution. No response was received.

We submitted a reworked application that included a fully costed business plan and fundraising plan in October 2022. In the same month, in fact, on the day our website went live and without any discussion, Cumbria County Council emailed to tell us our application had been unsuccessful.

“CCC [Cumbria County Council] cannot hold onto this asset indefinitely whilst the due diligence process is continually extended. Ongoing retention of the asset is currently costing the taxpayer £50K per annum. Regretfully, after due consideration we have come to the view that the business case, as submitted, does not demonstrate a viable future for this asset. Much of the content of the business case appears to be aspirational and based on optimism, but with little firm evidence to demonstrate achievable project delivery or viability. Unfortunately, even with the commissioning of further consultancy work, funded by Community Homes Fund monies, we remain unconvinced that the doubts we have about the project will change. CCC acknowledges the community-minded spirit which has motivated volunteers from within the local community to come forward to offer to take responsibility for the asset. Whilst such action is to be applauded there is concern that the core volunteer team would be taking on significant organisational and financial risks. It remains to be seen how any shortfall in income or capital funds would be met. CCC would not wish to facilitate the transfer of this substantial asset to local volunteers who would soon be struggling attempting to run a non-viable enterprise”, commercial development lead Cumbria County Council, 13 October 2022.

“[The shortcomings] of the proposal...would have been addressed if they had



What happened?

been identified [by Cumbria County Council] in a timely manner. We were offered critical friend support and although we asked for this it was not provided”, trustee, Staveley Community Trust.

In November 2022 the Landwood Group was instructed by Cumbria County Council to initiate a sale by formal tender. The tender described The Abbey as a former care home (28 beds) with alternative development potential (Subject to Planning Permission). With the site on the open market, the Community Homes Fund grant funding was no longer viable. We launched a Community Share Offer within 2-weeks of the sale notice.

“We thought we would get to a community share offer later in the journey to get community buy-in to the future once the asset was secured. But our hand was forced and we had to do it in a big rush...we had a five-week window to raise enough money to make an offer to buy the building, which happened to be over the Christmas and New Year break...They did not say how much money they wanted bidders to offer”, trustee, Staveley Community Trust.

“We have been fighting the loss of this service since consultation on closure began in the Autumn of 2019, starting with a significant community petition. Public meetings, consultations, surveys and advisory groups have informed ongoing development of partnerships to support our community proposal and the transfer of the asset from Cumbria County Council, at less than the market value...This Community Share Offer is our last chance to save the Abbey from commercial redevelopment...Your investment will make a real difference to the lives of older people”, Community Share Offer document.

Over the Christmas/New Year period in 2022/23 people were invited to invest



between £250 and £20,000 in the Community Share Offer, with a minimum commitment of 5-years for us to purchase the site and begin its transformation. We raised £179,000 within just 42 days.

"We received £500 from The Gateway Trust, a £1,000 donation from the local folk festival and a similar amount from coffee morning donations. While these smaller amounts did not make a dent in the big money required for the purchase, they demonstrated the community wanting to help us fight for the future of the Abbey", trustee, Staveley Community Trust.

Alongside this fundraising we increased our consultation with local residents – holding 2 large public meetings in the village hall and update meetings in smaller venues in the village.

"Most of our community work has taken place face-to-face at community meetings, coffee mornings and warm spaces... the local community have been galvanised by this campaign and have written hundreds of letters to local councillors, the MP and the planning authority to raise the profile of the conversation and to make it clear that we have a great proposal that they should support", trustee, Staveley Community Trust.

Residents wrote to officers and Elected Members at Cumbria County Council and observed Council meetings to see how the Abbey disposal was being debated. We were also challenging, hard, how Cumbria County Council had made decisions regarding the Abbey and the Community Asset Transfer. There was a lot of anger and frustration – but also real optimism that a great solution could still be reached.

"There was recognition of the model being a potential trail blazer project for



meeting the needs of older people in rural communities”, trustee, Staveley Community Trust.

‘New Abbey’ attracted press coverage because the model is innovative and community led. Local and national media documented the story and this created a buzz which engaged more residents and highlighted the Community Share Offer.

“We featured on many print, audio and video media including - BBC Northwest tonight, The Politics Show, ITV North, The Guardian, Westmorland Gazette, the Byline Times”, trustee, Staveley Community Trust.

In February 2023 Cumbria County Council confirmed to us that no tender had been successful. At the end of March 2023 under local government reorganisation, The Abbey transferred from Cumbria County Council to a new local authority: Westmorland and Furness Council. Westmorland and Furness Council paused the sale process as part of a full Asset Review of all local authority assets.

“Westmorland and Furness views the process as a real opportunity to do things differently. This includes reforming the way the council works to ensure interdependent services such as housing, health and wellbeing are all joined up”, Sam Plum, chief executive of Westmorland and Furness Council.

“The transformation of services will potentially take five years. We will need to prioritise those areas that need our focus earlier than others, and clearly adult and children’s social care are some of those priority areas”, Councillor Jonathan Brook, leader of Westmorland and Furness Council.

Westmorland and Furness Council carried out a new consultation with the local community – while this identified the need to maintain provision for older people, the local authority decided to pursue general needs affordable housing.

Staveley Community Trust was invited to meet with two Registered Housing Providers to see if elements of our proposal could be incorporated into their plans for the site, with the potential to shape what Westmorland and Furness would require in a tender. One of the providers we met is actively involved in the village and was very supportive of our approach. Unfortunately, they have withdrawn from the conversation with Westmorland and Furness Council on the future of the Abbey site. At the time of writing, November 2024, the tender document has not been released.



What have we learnt along the way?

“What do we say to our senior citizens if they can’t find care or can’t get carers because there’s a shortage across the board: tough? Hard luck? Cope as you are? That’s not on”, Councillor Pat Bell, Westmorland & Lonsdale.

While we were invited by the local authority to look at a future for The Abbey, at various key points along the way we have not felt listened to or supported. Because of the journey we have been on since 2019, we want to share our learning to help other communities and public bodies understand what might be needed to make Community Asset Transfer work.

Community learning

- a) **What can you achieve in your community?** You need to be ambitious for your place and your community. Take a fresh look at how buildings and land assets are used and have a clear sense of what you want to achieve. Knowing what you have, and what you need for the future, should be an important part of any community plan.
- b) **Are you clear on how the community vision will help others to deliver theirs?** Look at your local authority’s strategic documents and consider how what you want to achieve helps them to protect or enhance local services and facilities. See what your local council’s community asset transfer policy says about the process. Share your thinking with an elected member(s) or officer(s), and make sure you remain true to what the community wants to achieve.
- c) **Are you taking the community with you on the whole journey?** Community Asset Transfer is a lengthy, time consuming and demanding process. Community engagement and communication have been ongoing components of our work as we have sought to maintain momentum and keep residents up-to-date. Have a communications plan.
- d) **Are you clear on your governance?** You need to be accountable to your community through your governance structure. For The Abbey, a Community Benefit Society with charitable objects and an asset lock preventing profit for private gain was used. You could also explore other options that do not involve full ownership of an asset such as ‘meanwhile use’ or ‘short leases’ which can provide a pathway through to full ownership. The group/committee of volunteers leading your initiative need the personal commitment and capacity to make things happen. We needed to be resilient (individually and within our committee) to take a lot of knocks and bounce back.
- e) **How are you drawing on local residents, groups and the public structures and relationships that already exist?** Take help when it is offered by volunteers with expertise, skills or passion. We received pro bono support from local people with technical design/build skills. Identify who your key political allies might be locally – for us this was the Parish Council, district ward councillor and MP.
- f) **Can you apply for external funding to support you in the design, development and set up stage?** Local residents supported us because they wanted to see the proposal through, but everyone is a volunteer. As a community it is hard to raise the funding needed to buy and renovate an asset and run it sustainably in the longer term, so see if you can access funding to help strengthen your capacity and capability. The Community Homes Fund was an excellent and timely opportunity for us to receive support with capacity building.
- g) **Have you got a viable business plan to help you secure the asset and raise finance?** You need to understand how much your asset will cost you to take on (refurbish/upgrade) and to operate now and in the long-term (capital and revenue costs). We spent time understanding the current market and operating environment for the different components of the working model, identified potential funders and did cashflow forecasts and risk analyses.

What more public bodies can and should do to support communities

- a) **Build stronger relationships at a neighbourhood level:** public bodies need to be willing to work towards building a more equal partnership with communities – this needs to be an approach based on relationships, building connections and mutual trust.
- b) **Be clear on the structures, systems, mechanisms and processes that you need communities to follow and clearly communicate this:** provide communities with guidance on the Community Asset Transfer process, the timescales, what to expect and the advice and support you can offer. Ideally communication will be a key part of your transfer support – provide the community with a named contact who can keep them updated on progress.
- c) **Be clear on how you intend to operationalise and implement strategic documents:** if a community group offers a practical way to deliver local strategic priorities, be clear on how you will work with the community to deliver this, or set out how you intend to operationalise your strategic documents in other ways.

“There should be effective communication with the community about how relevant strategic aims of the public body are to be met in the community. Additional aspirations should be explored and how these might be met in the future should be explained to the community and that might lead to a development of community plans etc”, trustee, Staveley Community Trust.

- d) **Public consultations should offer realistic and researched options, be based upon community engagement and a commitment to listen and use resident responses:** do your research on relevant community groups, inform the Parish Council and look at local documents (e.g. Community or Parish Plan) before you carry out a consultation on the future of an asset. Only set out options in consultation documents that are viable, and if you are unable to fulfil the option(s) preferred by the local community, provide clear feedback stating why.

“Public consultation processes need to be more meaningful than something a public body has to do. This also means recognising that ‘community power’ won’t come in any pre-determined shape or package and residents won’t jump through hoops towards a decision that has already been made”, trustee, Staveley Community Trust.

- e) **Deploy capacity and resources so communities can take action:** you can act as a sounding board and critical friend to communities looking to take on an asset – providing internal scrutiny, advice and support in-kind such as access to property management and financial expertise. You can also support communities to identify and apply for funding for initial, pre-feasibility and feasibility work. Recognise that communities need resources and time to do the preparatory and implementation work required for asset transfer.
- f) **Be clear on how decisions are made and how communities can expect their case for asset transfer to be considered.** If you cannot proceed with a community asset transfer, share your rationale for not proceeding and consider how you will continue to work with residents to realise their vision in other ways.



Where are we now?

We asked for a meeting with Officers and Elected Members in June 2024 to discuss future options for The Abbey. Westmorland and Furness Council is preparing a tender document so that a Registered Provider of Social Housing can purchase The Abbey for general needs housing. This is a clear barrier to community ownership and even to meaningful community involvement.

Despite the local community having an innovative solution where social care flourishes rather than struggles, we have not been able to secure this outcome. The whole journey has been an emotional roller-coaster where we have been frenetic at some points and frustrated at others because we were expected to 'wait and see'.

We raised over £179,000 with the local community to bid to buy the building when it was on the open market. We have had to return all of this money, as community purchase is no longer an option the council will consider. This has been particularly disappointing as we expect the result of the tender will be that The Abbey will be given as a development opportunity for general needs affordable homes, with zero financial return to the Council.

"There were so many aspects that were amazing and uplifting and with so much learning along the way. We achieved so much, inspired so much and were inspired. At each corner a new vision of the possible was opened. It was the vision of a better future that drove us, not the fight. We were right: they were wrong. Even so we lost, they won - they had power, we had none. I don't regret having 'done it' but it would take a lot to inspire me to 'do it again' in the current context and with the current actors. I've been disheartened and disillusioned by a system that speaks of empowerment whilst keeping all the power to itself and using bureaucracy and procedure to stifle creativity and community action", trustee, Staveley Community Trust.

The Abbey building remains empty and deteriorating with vegetation growing from the chimney, soffits and gutters. If we are to believe the Council estimates, it is costing £50,000 per annum without providing any community benefits. The needs of older and frail residents of Staveley and surrounding villages are not being met and many continue to live in unsuitable accommodation. They remain anxious about their future.

We would like to believe that there is a future here, in which **people do not have to leave the community to access the social care they need**. As things stand, we can't see to see how our small rural community can achieve this without a willingness to try something new and a significant shift in intention from our statutory partners.





Staveley Community Trust

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