

AN UPDATE AND CONSULTATION REGARDING THE BLUE CROSS SITE

Residents will be aware that in the Autumn of 2016 the Blue Cross closed their centre in Northiam and announced that they would be putting their 34 acre site up for sale in the Spring of 2017.

Northiam Parish Council was approached by a large number of residents concerned that the site would be sold to speculators and so looked into the feasibility of the village purchasing it so that current and future generations would have control over how the land was used.

A survey held in November 2016 produced many and varied ideas from residents as to how the site could be used for the benefit of the village.

The Parish Council then investigated possible funding options on the presumption that the site would be sold at auction. The Council found that it would be possible to apply for a loan of up to £2m from central government, paid back over 50 years on a fixed rate and secured against the precept (that part of the Council Tax bill that goes to the village). This would entail raising the precept by about £100 per annum for a Class D household for the **period of the loan**.

In February 2017 a second survey was held asking residents if they supported this proposed increase. The 40% of households that responded voted by a narrow margin in favour and so the increase took place for the financial year 2017/18 and the Parish Council subsequently applied for the loan.

Shortly afterwards the Blue Cross announced that, due to their charitable status, they were obliged to get 'best value' for their assets and so were going to delay the sale of the site until the Spring of 2018 while they considered their options.

Because the sale of the land has been delayed, the Parish Council cannot legally continue to ask for the increased precept. It has therefore **not** been applied to the 2018/19 Council Tax bill.

The funds raised by the 2017/18 increase (£100,000) are currently held in secure accounts awaiting future developments.

Additionally, the delay in the sale means that the loan application has expired and therefore the Parish Council are obliged by the Government to hold another consultation to confirm whether or not there is still support for the proposed scheme.

This communication is the start of that consultation process which will run until 6th April.

On the other sides of this leaflet you will find details of how the Parish Council envisages the site could be used and developed into a viable and useful asset for the Village. More information is available on the website www.northiamvillage.co.uk/bluecross and at the Parish Office. There will also be an 'Open House' at the Village Hall on Sunday 18th March from 12pm-6pm when Councillors will be available to answer further questions.

Enclosed with this leaflet is a voting slip and a reply-paid envelope. Please fill this in and return by 6th April at the latest. It is important that the Parish Council has a clear mandate on whether to proceed on this issue, one way or the other, so please do reply.

YOUR VIEWS ON THIS MATTER ARE IMPORTANT

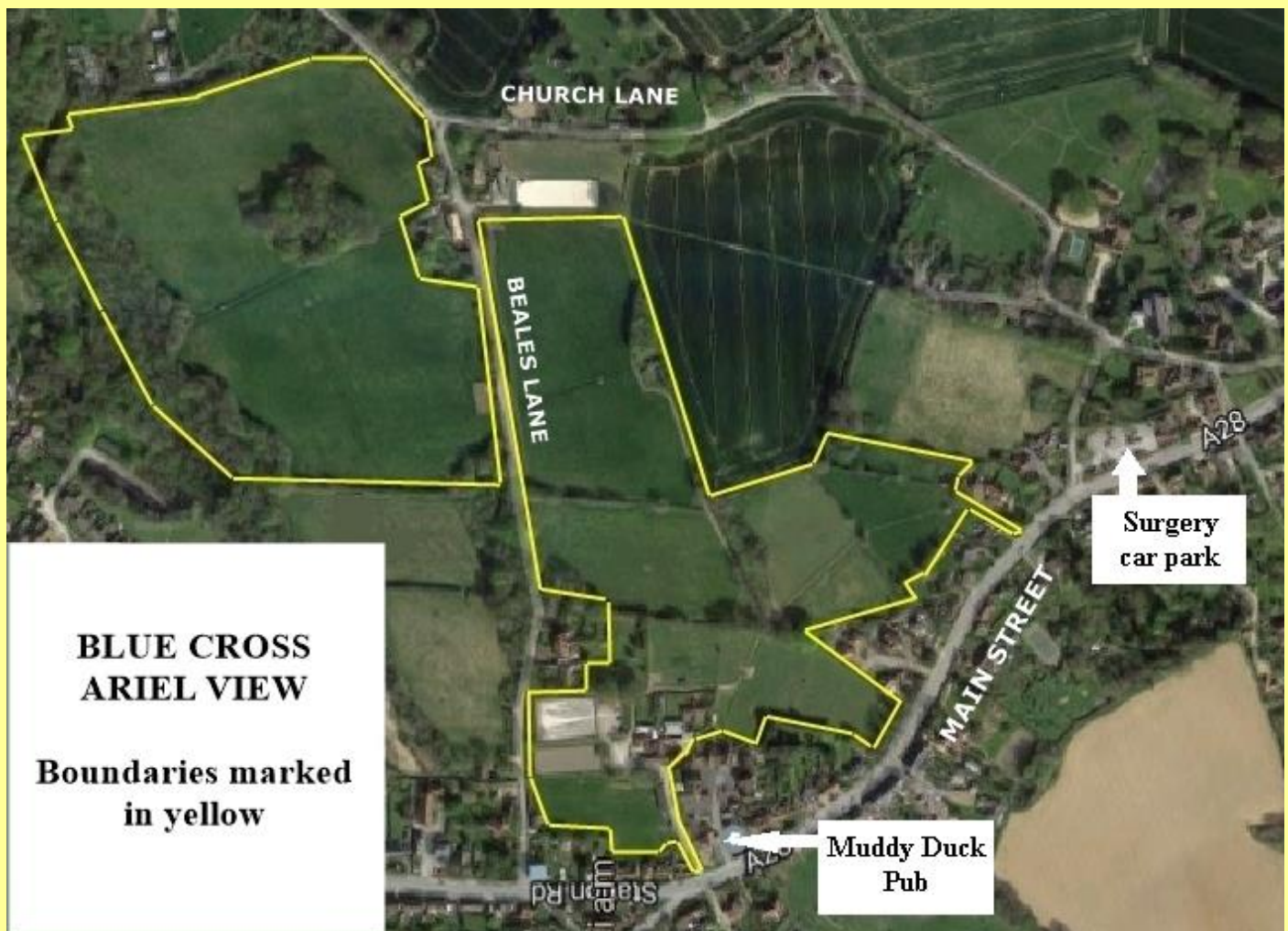
WHY SHOULD WE TRY TO BUY?

The site sits centrally in the village as shown by the map below. It is based around a central core of old farm buildings, with fields that extend towards the church and down both sides of Beales Lane. It also includes a long section of Harlots Wood which is an ancient woodland and ideally should be in the care of the village for posterity.

All of the site lies within the 'High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' and the western side of the site abuts the Northiam Conservation Area.

If the village was able to acquire the site then residents and future generations would have a direct say in how the land is used for the good of the community. The Council believes that the site has great potential to become a central hub offering a variety of facilities that would enhance village life.

For this to happen the village needs to own the land. With ownership comes control.



HOW WOULD WE USE THE SITE?

The site has the potential for many uses, as was clearly shown by the responses we had to our initial survey in November 2016. We consider some of the main objectives could be:

Creation of a new multi-purpose space that would house offices, craft workshops, exhibition spaces, social spaces for activities and maybe even a micro-brewery, centred where the old farm buildings currently stand.

Building a small number of properties available exclusively for local residents and made genuinely affordable. These could either be rental properties, or alternatively part-owned which are then resold back to other village residents. This can be achieved by applying for an "Exception Site"

There is a proven need for this kind of housing locally to allow our young people and older citizens to remain in the village rather than having to move away.

Creation of a natural burial ground which would not only provide burial space for residents now that the village cemetery is full, but with careful planting could become a haven for wildlife and a place for quiet reflection.

Opening up footpath and bridle-path routes through the site for walkers and riders to enjoy.

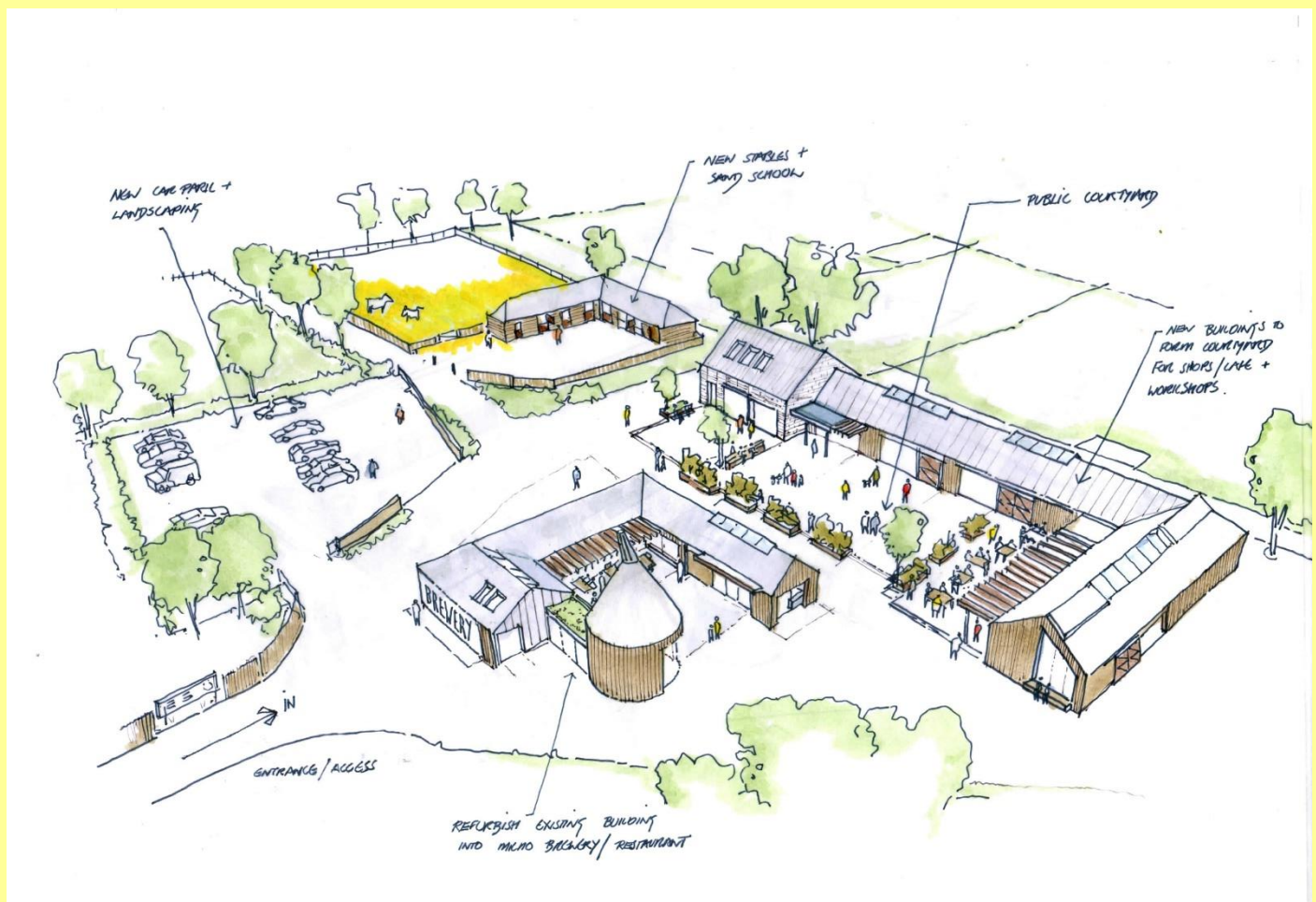
Reinstate (and maybe at some point relocate) the equine facilities to rent out to local horse owners.

HOW WOULD IT WORK?

The Parish Council would own the freehold but is not allowed by law to run a business. The day-to-day running of the site would therefore be put in the hands of a “Community Interest Company” (similar to a Trust) which would be run by a group of residents on a voluntary basis, ideally those with a business background and the determination to make the project succeed.

For the first couple of years the object would simply be to ensure that the income generated by the site covered the cost of its outgoings and basic maintenance. The stables, sand-school and fields could be rented out, as could the various office spaces and the bungalows. During this time, more comprehensive plans would be drawn up and ‘change of use’ applications put in as necessary. Additionally, funding and grant aid would be sought to allow improvements to proceed.

The next stage would be the upgrading of the site, the end result of which would hopefully be a new central multi-purpose space that would act as a centre for many different activities. Local architect Rob Pollard has created this sketch to give some idea of what might possibly be achieved.



The funding for this would come from outside sources. It would **not** be paid for by residents via the precept.

Any profits made by the enterprise would be channelled back into the site or other village projects.

WHAT HAPPENS IF?

If the majority of residents are not in favour of these plans, then the additional precept from 2017/18 will be refunded to all who have paid it.

If the majority of residents support these plans but the subsequent loan application is not successful, then the additional precept will be refunded.

If the majority of residents support these plans and the loan application is successful, but we are then outbid when the site comes up for sale, then the additional precept will be refunded.

WHAT ARE BLUE CROSS PLANNING?

Rother's 'Development and Site Allocation Plan' states that '*Sites located centrally and to the east of the village are considered to be inappropriate because of access constraints, impact on the Conservation Area and the wider impact on the AONB landscape*'. Despite this, the Blue Cross in an attempt to increase the value of the site have asked Rother District Council to consider whether it would give consent to build 125 houses on the land nearest the village (see below). The Parish Council has strongly objected to this proposal and awaits Rother's decision.



Should this proposal be supported by Rother District Council then the value of the land will increase ten-fold and there will be a bidding war between developers keen to turn the centre of Northiam into a housing estate. However, it is always possible that these proposals will be refused in which case the village should stand a reasonable chance of purchasing the site should it so decide.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

The Parish Council needs a clear mandate from residents as to whether or not to proceed.

Please take time to fill in the enclosed voting slip and then return it in the enclosed 'Freepost' envelope by 6th April

The vote will be counted publicly on Sunday 8th April at 2.30pm at the Village Hall