



ST FRANCIS FIELDS

NORTHIAM

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St Francis Fields CIC

CIC stands for Community Interest Company, and ours is known as the St Francis Fields Community Interest Company.

St Francis Fields (SFF) is the old Blue Cross site, purchased by Northiam Parish Council in 2020 as a village amenity.

In order to buy the site, a 50-year government loan of £1.4m was taken out by Northiam Parish Council, costing around £75,000 in the first year in interest and capital repayments. The rate of interest and the repayment element of the loan are fixed, so every year the amount owed to the Government reduces and, by the end of the loan period, there will be nothing left to pay. (This year, 2022/23, the loan repayment figure is £71,677, which shows how the payments are already reducing.)

Currently the loan is funded by an increase of £50,000 in the precept paid by householders, and also from letting the two bungalows and the stables on site which together are expected to generate £25,000 a year.

The precept is the amount that goes to the parish council from the council tax which each householder pays. Most of the precept goes to pay for essential village services. In this financial year 2022/23, the extra cost to a Band "D" household for the £50,000 increase in the precept for SFF is less than £1 a week (a single occupant in a property gets a 25% discount). Over the lifetime of the loan, the real cost of the additional precept to each householder will reduce due to inflation.

If the rental income is maintained, there is every chance that, as the cost of the loan reduces, so should the amount of the additional precept and therefore the cost to householders.

Why do we need a CIC?

When the site was purchased, Northiam Parish Council didn't have the necessary legal standing known as the "General Power of Competence" to run St Francis Fields itself. As a result, it was always made clear in documentation provided to the village, and in order to obtain the loan, that a Community Interest Company would be set up to manage St Francis Fields on behalf of the Parish Council and for the benefit of the village.

A Community Interest Company is a business with social objectives where surpluses are reinvested in the business or in the community rather than distributed to shareholders.

In May 2021, the St Francis Fields CIC was formed and in August of that year, an agreement was signed with the Parish Council appointing St Francis Fields CIC as its managing agent for the estate. The CIC now has eight directors.

The directors of the CIC are all village residents with various professional backgrounds along with enthusiasm and a can-do attitude. We all work as volunteers and give our time free of charge. The wording of the CIC's constitution ensures that no Director can ever earn money or benefit in any way from CIC business.

You can become a member of the CIC

We are now inviting Northiam residents who may have a particular skill to contribute, or the enthusiasm to be involved and support the Parish Council's and the CIC's endeavours for the site, to become members of the CIC. The directors of the CIC will continue to be responsible for the day-to-day running of the site but becoming a member will give you the chance to become involved, put forward your views on future developments at St Francis Fields and to have voting rights at the CIC's annual general meetings.

If you would like to become a member of the CIC, please email us for an application form, or pick one up from the box on our noticeboard at the main entrance to St Francis Fields on Main Street. The form also gives full details about what becoming a member of the CIC means.

What's been happening on the site?

It's clear that very limited maintenance was carried out on the estate in the latter years of the Blue Cross so the CIC and the maintenance team began by carrying out a survey of the estate and identifying to the Parish Council the most urgent works that were needed. Many of these jobs have now been carried out but many future improvements of the site will need the CIC and the Parish Council to obtain grant funding. The intention is that, as a result of these works, St Francis Fields will in time be able to pay its own way.

The CIC couldn't manage the site on behalf of the Parish Council without the help of our exceptional volunteer maintenance team. The team has worked on building repairs, water supply issues, works to prevent flooding affecting both us and our neighbours, maintaining hedges and trees, clearing the ground and installing new gates for the footpath, and fence and gate repairs.

Much of the CIC directors' time to date had been spent on dealing with a whole host of legalities, but in addition to overseeing the maintenance of the site and carrying out vital repairs, we have been able to open a permissive footpath, and set up a pop-up pub over the last two summers to raise money for future improvements.

What are the future plans for the site?

At the Open Days in early 2020, villagers put forward their suggestions and proposals for what they'd like to see on the site.

As a result, one field is already earmarked for a natural burial ground, using the Donsmead Section 106 monies and providing that the relevant consents can be obtained.

A pub was the number one request from villagers and we are pleased to have been able to open a pop-up pub over the past two summers. In the future, we would like to improve the facilities, to provide a purpose-built kitchen and bar room. A new kitchen would mean a café could be opened on site too, maybe pop-up or maybe more frequently, and more community activities could take place here.

Other suggestions made during the open days and under consideration include woodland management, a local produce outlet, a fitness trail, providing more workshops and studios on the site, art exhibitions, craft fairs and workshops, a safe dog exercise area, children's activities and countryside days. All these would of course be subject to funding and planning requirements. We've made some good progress behind the scenes in researching and costing these, but before we can do anything else, we have a problem...

The need for 'Change of Use'

All future development of the estate will have to take into account the need for planning permission. 'Change of use' is required by Rother District Council planning department for the existing buildings, and it is already overdue. The St Francis Fields estate currently still has the same use class, known as "sui generis", as it did when The Blue Cross used it for animal rescue and rehoming activities and it is already being used for other purposes. However, before we can start the process of applying for change of use to the correct category for the stables, the planned minor renovation works to the Hub and the proposed future natural burial ground, we have had to seek pre-application advice from ESCC Highways Department on whether the various access points and parking on the estate are considered acceptable for these uses.

We have now heard that the natural burial ground proposal, which would be accessed via Orchard Gate (on Main Street, near the doctors' surgery car park), is likely to be acceptable. But ESCC has asked us to provide additional information on the other proposals, which we have now done and we are now waiting to hear its verdict. The tricky single-track access on to Main Street for the stables and Hub may prove problematic. We will keep you updated as soon as we have further information on this.

Want to know more?

We submit regular reports to the Parish Council – if you would like to receive a copy of these, be kept up to date with what's going on generally or become a member of the St Francis Fields CIC, or become involved in any other way, please email us at the address below.

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