

Potential purchase of the ‘Blue Cross’ site by the people of Northiam

Supporting documentation to accompany application for loan of £2m from Public Works Loan Board



History

In 1951 a philanthropic resident donated some farm buildings together with six acres of land in the heart of the village to the Blue Cross for them to use as a rescue centre for horses. Over time the charity purchased more fields and a section of ancient woodland and expanded the centre to include kennels and a cattery as part of their animal re-homing scheme. The equine facility was also improved by the addition of two sand schools. The total size of the site is now thirty-four acres all within the High Weald AONB.

A few years ago the Blue Cross decided to relocate the horses to their centre in Oxfordshire and then in October 2016 announced that they were closing their Northiam operation completely and would be selling the site in the Spring of 2017.

Over the years the centre has been a source of local employment, a social centre for the many volunteers who helped the charity, and has been part of the local economy. It has also managed and maintained a large green space in the centre of the village which most residents presumed would be preserved in perpetuity. The site now sits abandoned.

Initial Consultation

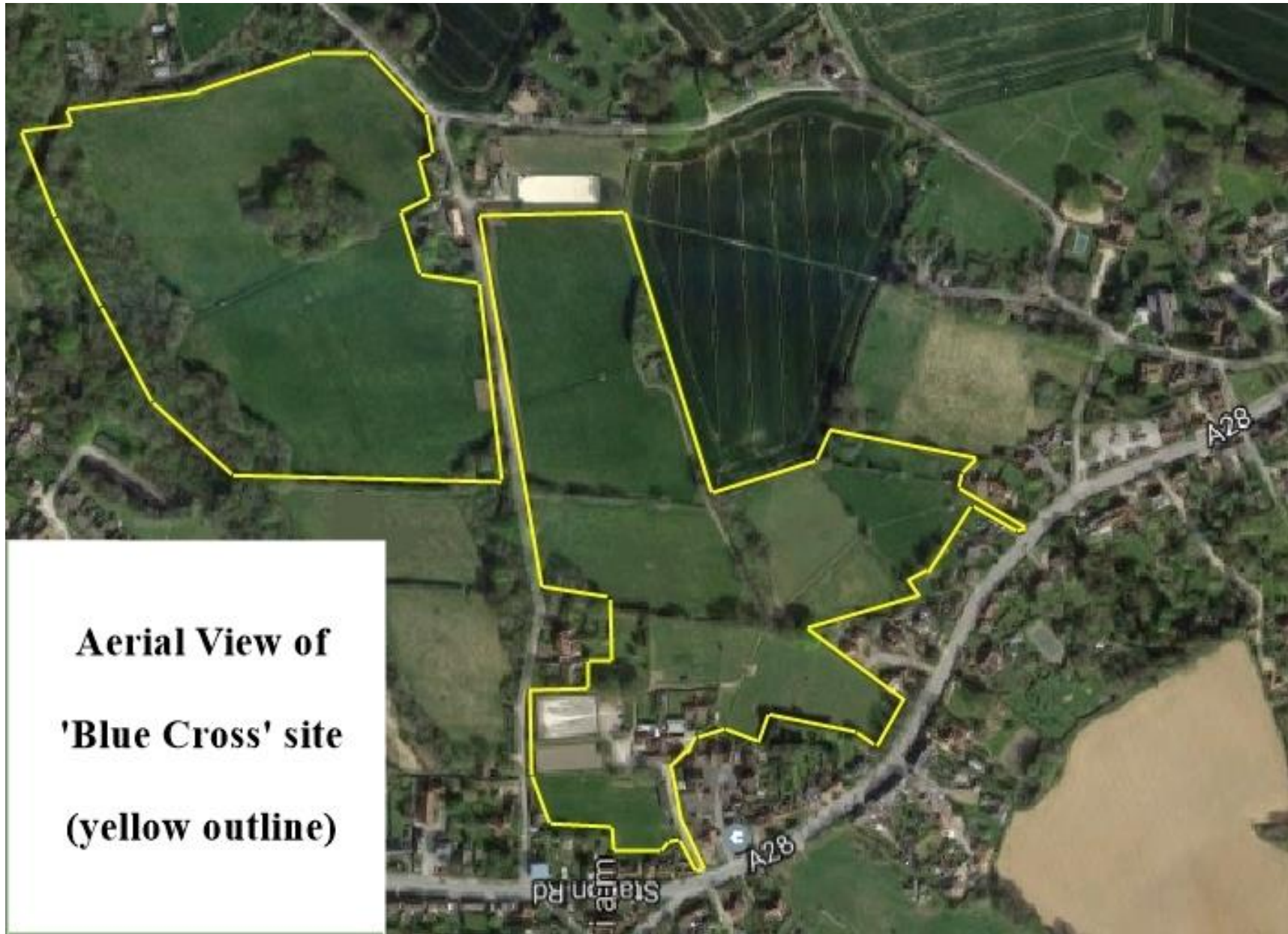
The Parish Council was approached by many residents concerned that the site would be sold off to developers. After due consideration the Parish Council decided to look into the feasibility of the village buying the site for the benefit of not only current residents but also for future generations. To this effect a survey form was delivered in mid-November to most of the 900+ households in the village to gauge support for the idea and to attract suggestions as to its possible future use (see appendix A).

About 1 in 6 households responded to this survey as follows;

Supported	121
Maybe	25
Not supported	3

The file containing all the responses and suggestions from residents is held in the Parish Office. There were many and varied ideas as to how the site could be used for the benefit of the village.

The Parish Council subsequently held a public meeting on the 24 November which was well attended and where Mr Trevor Leggo (CEO of SSALC Ltd) gave details and insight into possible methods of financing the purchase. The mood of this meeting was very supportive.



**Aerial View of
'Blue Cross' site
(yellow outline)**

The Vision

The principal reason for the determination by a majority in the village to own the former Blue Cross land is to enable the village to determine the future development of this land for the benefit of the residents, in perpetuity.

Resulting from the initial consultation these are some of the uses for the site that are currently being considered:

- Renting out the existing two bungalows to village residents at an affordable rate.
- Building a small number of houses on an ‘exception site’ basis specifically to rent to village residents
- Reconfiguring the existing buildings to create office and workshop space for local businesses and artisans at affordable rates. There is also the potential to redevelop the central core so that it becomes a multi-purpose ‘hub’ for various community resources. Setting up a micro-brewery / pub as the village has been without a pub for several years.
- Creating a woodland burial ground in a suitable field. The village currently has no available cemetery space and residents wishing to be buried are currently obliged to go elsewhere.
- Creating facilities for an outdoor activity centre
- Renting out the equine facilities to local horse owners and/or possibly to local equine charities.
- Creating facilities for dog obedience and agility classes.
- Creating a footpath and bridleway linking Main Street with Beales Lane.
- Establishing wild flower meadows / honey production

This list is by no means exhaustive but gives a clear indication of the range of ideas suggested by the Council and the local community to make best use of the site.

If the village is able to purchase the freehold then a ‘Community Interest Company’ (CIC) would be created to run the day-to-day operation. Additional funding to enhance and improve facilities would come from grants and creating partnerships with interested parties. We see it being a multi-purpose amenity for the village for generations to come.



View of church from centre of site



View across fields from the high ground behind central buildings



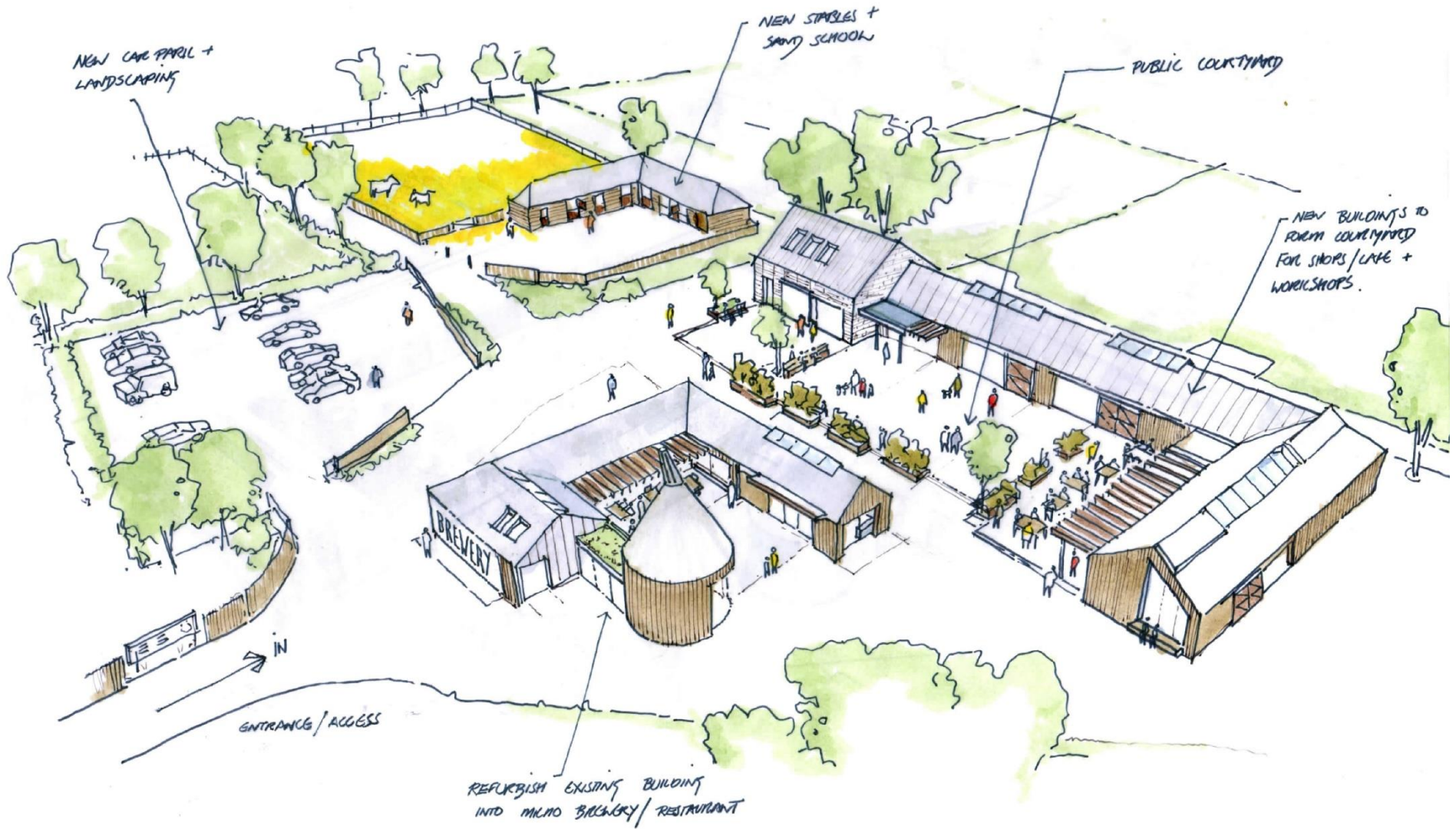
View of Harlots Wood – Ancient Woodland



Oast house and other outbuildings in central core

Sand schools





Sketch design by chartered architect to show possible redevelopment of central area to create a village 'hub'

Finance

The Blue Cross is a charity and is therefore legally bound to get ‘best value’ when selling an asset. To date we do not know if it is intended to sell the site as one entity or to dispose of it in small lots. We are presuming that it will most likely be sold at auction.

Accurate valuation of the site is difficult as we are unable to gain access for a close inspection of the facilities until it comes to market. We have had an informal meeting with the district planning officer who considers that our estimate of £2m is not unreasonable.

In the absence of any wealthy local benefactors the Parish Council therefore decided to apply for a Government loan. We obtained figures from the Public Works Loan Board and based on these estimates decided that we would increase the village precept by £100k to enable us to service a loan of £2m should our application prove successful.

We then held a second survey of all households to establish whether this increase would be acceptable (see appendix B) and the vote was counted publicly at an extraordinary meeting held on 16 February with the following result;

For	218
Against	204

This represented a response rate of approximately 42% overall and the Parish Council considered that this was enough of a mandate to proceed.

For more information please contact:

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Ray Harrington-Lowe

Clerk, Northiam Parish Council – clerk@northiamvillage.co.uk – phone 01797 253990

Appendix A – Initial survey sent out in November 2016

From Northiam Parish Council - Future of the Blue Cross Site

The Blue Cross has informed the Parish Council that they intend to sell the site in the near future. The Parish Council are now looking into the feasibility of purchasing the site for the village.

We believe the site has the potential to become a multi-purpose hub which could benefit the village in perpetuity. This idea is in its early stages and we welcome all suggestions as to its possible future use.

To date we have the following suggestions:

- Renting out stables & some fields either to an equine charity or to private horse owners
- Creation of offices, workshops & storage space for local craftsmen & businesses.
- Creation of a woodland burial ground to satisfy our urgent need for new cemetery space.
- The possibility of building a small number of rental properties to be made available only to local people, both young & old.
- Hopefully create employment opportunities for local residents.

Naturally any plans we have will depend on our ability to raise a substantial amount of funding. There is the possibility of getting a Government backed loan if we can produce a strong enough proposal, and we would certainly need financial support from local benefactors as well.

For this to move forward we need the input and support of residents, and to this end we are canvassing views prior to a public consultation on Thursday 24th November at the Village Hall from 4pm – 8pm with an informal Q&A session at 7pm.

This is a rare chance to try and acquire a site that has been central to village life for the last 50 years and to give it new purpose in the future. We welcome your views and would ask you to fill in this short survey. Forms can be returned to the Parish Office, Spar, Jempsons & Will's, or brought along to the Village Hall on 24th November.

Question: Does your household broadly support this idea? Yes / No / Maybe

Please enter any thoughts, ideas, suggestions & comments you may have in the box below

Feel free to continue overleaf

Appendix B – Second survey sent out in February 2017

Last November we delivered a questionnaire to virtually every household in the village asking for resident's opinions regarding our proposal to try and purchase the Blue Cross site. The intention was to use the site for a variety of purposes including equine facilities, natural burial ground, workshops and offices thus bringing life back to a site that has been central to the village for the last 60 years. Those who chose to respond to the survey were nearly all supportive of the idea, as were the residents who subsequently attended a public meeting

**Very Important Message from
Northiam Parish Council
To the Occupiers**

To date we have been unable to find any wealthy benefactor to help finance this scheme and so your Council decided to apply to the Secretary of State to see if it could get a Government loan.

To qualify we would need to substantially raise the precept so that we have funds in place to service the loan if we get it.

At our last meeting we proposed to raise the precept to £150,000. To go ahead we need your support and agreement. There will obviously be a cost implication to your Council Tax bill.

For a band D property this would result in an increase of about £2 per week per household. Lower band properties would pay proportionally less and higher band properties more.

The Parish Council feel that this is a once in a lifetime chance for the village to try and acquire this asset for the use of current and future residents. We are however very aware that you should have the final say in this matter and so would ask you to indicate your household's view on the form below and then return it to one of our collection boxes by Tuesday 14th February.

We need to submit our precept figure to Rother District Council by the middle of February at the very latest and so need a clear indication from the village residents as to whether or not they are happy for us to proceed with this increase.

**IT IS IMPORTANT THAT THE PARISH COUNCIL HAVE A CLEAR MANDATE
PLEASE RESPOND TO THIS SURVEY**



	YES – We support the Council's proposal to increase the precept to £150,000
	NO – We do not support the Council's proposed increase to the precept

Please return this voting slip by **Tuesday 14th February** at the latest to one of our collection boxes which will be at the Parish Office, Will's Bakery, Spar and Jempsons

Or you can post it to the Clerk, Parish Office, Main Street, TN31 6LP