

# Pub is the Hub Case Study

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## The Fox & Hounds, Ennerdale Bridge, Cumbria CA23 3AR



Ennerdale Bridge is an isolated rural community in the Western Lake District. It sits as the gateway to the Wild Ennerdale Valley and apart from farming relies on tourism including the walkers reaching the end of day 1 on the Wainwright Coast-to-Coast walk and visitors coming to enjoy the most unspoilt valley and lake in Cumbria.

The community became concerned as the rural services on which they relied were progressively lost for example the shop, post office and the emaciation of the rural bus service. The Ennerdale and Kinniside Parish Council undertook a series of consultation events and surveys to establish how people felt about this loss of service and to determine what the local community wanted to see reinstated. This consultation process lasted for a period of 2 years. The result was an agenda for activity that would begin the regeneration of this community. To test out the viability of these ideas the Parish Council gained funding from Cumbria Fells and Dales to carry out a feasibility study and they appointed Porter Brown Solutions to carry out the study. The feasibility Study recommended that the restoration of the village shop was both needed and viable as a business. The full feasibility study report can be found [at www.wildennerdale.co.uk/hub/hubprojectplan.pdf](http://www.wildennerdale.co.uk/hub/hubprojectplan.pdf)

Midway through this feasibility study process, the village pub, The Fox and Hounds Inn, was closed and boarded up. This provided the catalyst for community action; notwithstanding the other projects signalled in the Feasibility Study report, the first challenge was to reopen the Fox and Hounds. A small group of villagers were brought together under the leadership of a project manager, charged to make this happen. The starting point was a business plan which helped to identify that £67,000 was needed to take over the lease of the pub (The business was independently owned and not for sale) and to pay the start-up costs associated with the reopening.

An Industrial and Provident Society (for community benefit) was formed, registered with the FAS. The idea was to sell shares to try to raise the £67,000. However, the owner of the pub had set a deadline to the group to prove that the idea of raising share capital was viable.

A village meeting was called and 130 people attended. The unanimous view of the meeting was summarised by the phrase, “give us our pub back”. It has to be said that there was some scepticism about the target; villagers were given just 10 days in which to pledge money (in multiples of £100 with the maximum at £20,000) if the project was to go ahead. The target of £67,000 was reached in just 8 days. In some ways what was even more remarkable was that not one person reneged on their pledge and in the days that followed all of the money that had been pledged was collected and banked.

At the time of writing (April 2012) the number of shares sold has reached £89,850 with a total of 217 shareholders. Almost 40% of shareholders bought shares at the minimum level of £100. Just over 84% of shareholders had shares valued at £500 or less. This met the project team’s aspiration to encourage maximum participation and this achievement was reflected in what was to follow. The project team set the opening date as Monday 4<sup>th</sup> April 2011; that was just 4 weeks after the money was raised and 6 weeks after the public meeting in the church. The early opening was chosen to capitalise on the business potential offered by the start of the Coast-to-Coast season, Easter Bank Holiday and the additional public holidays announced to celebrate the royal wedding. What followed was 4 weeks of frenetic activity; hundreds of villages turned out to help prepare for the opening, cleaning, redecorating, repairing, building and gardening. “Volunteer Weekends” were declared and people gave of their time and energy freely to make it happen.

The Fox and Hounds reopened as planned on 4<sup>th</sup> April 2011 and enjoyed real success.

The turnover in the first 11 months exceeded £270,000 against a business plan full year target of £250,000. The community had achieved its first goal and reopened the village pub. The project team were now able to turn their attention to the feasibility Study report and consider re-establishing the village shop. The prime location for the village shop was identified as a disused Forestry Commission building on the western side of the village. After negotiations with the Forestry Commission the use of the site was agreed in principle. The ensuing discussion identified a proposal that met more of the feasibility study targets. The Ennerdale Centre would include a village shop, a tourist and information centre and a base for the Wild Ennerdale Team. This would provide an essential service for local people but would also meet the needs of tourists to the area.

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The Parish Council, using the residue of the Cumbria Fells and Dales grant left over from the feasibility study to extend the work done there and write a business plan for The Ennerdale Centre.

The outcome supported the proposition and the likely viability of the enterprise. One further and final consultation took place in February 2012. An exhibition outlining the proposal was on display for a week in St Mary's church before a meeting there on Tuesday 28th February. The same material was also published on the Web. Full details of the exhibition materials and a summary of the outcome at: [www.wildennerdale.co.uk/theennerdalecentre/index.html](http://www.wildennerdale.co.uk/theennerdalecentre/index.html)

The overwhelming outcome of that consultation was to proceed on the basis of the business plan on the Forestry Commission site. The preferred option, given the cost of refurbishment of the old building, was to demolish and go for a new building. The possibility of a unitary building would be part of the exploration in the hope that it might be a less costly option. The planning authority gave a ringing endorsement to this proposal. It is hoped that The Ennerdale Centre will open in the spring of 2013.

- The community has become a more cohesive group since it has successfully completed the pub element of the project. The first outcome has been the beneficial effect on the outlook and the confidence of the community.
- The Ennerdale Hub Board was elected in June 1012 and has worked hard to support the project. A subgroup of Directors oversees the Fox and Hounds and keeps it on track.
- There was great anxiety about the loss of trade out of the tourist season; indeed in November takings were only half those in July and August. Since then it has been the support of 217 shareholders that have kept the business rewardingly high.
- One by-product has been to see the Fox and Hounds as a real hub for the community. It's not just a pub; it houses a village library stocked in collaboration with the Cumbria Library Service, hosts quiz events for the school PTA, and a Craft Group who meet every Thursday to learn and pass on traditional craft skills. Special food nights and reduced cost pensioner lunches all help to keep the pub buzzing when others have struggled. It has become the venue of choice to host wedding and birthday parties and runs tradition post-funeral teas.
- The community has been empowered by the experience and have little or no doubt of the likely success of The Ennerdale Centre.

### LESSONS TO LEARN

- Shareholders receive regular "updates" to keep them informed of progress. It has a website and a Facebook page and has benefited from substantial media coverage. These strategies have kept everyone in the loop. A new set of updates will now document the development of The Ennerdale Centre.
- 217 shareholders is a great achievement. However, with 217 shareholders come 218 different points of view. Managing shareholder feedback has at times been an issue.
- This model of management requires paid staff who are up to the job and who are happy to work to the model defined by the Board. Such a person has proved very difficult to find.
- Volunteers have proved, throughout, to be an essential part of the equation. Volunteering is an ephemeral and variable commodity and, more often than not, relies on the same old faces. Volunteering on a long term basis can be difficult to sustain.
- The project demonstrates that community groups don't always need to raise the capital to buy a pub when they could try taking on a suitable lease agreement.
- It is an ongoing struggle to fix in people's minds that the pub is just one element of a larger regeneration strategy. Perhaps it will only be with the opening of The Ennerdale Centre that this will be understood by everyone.

**LICENSEE CONTACT:**  
**TEL:**  
**PUB OWNER:**

Peter Maher  
01946 861 373  
Private Landlord

**For more information telephone 01423 546165 or email [enquiries@pubisthehub.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@pubisthehub.org.uk)**