

Villagers want to take on closure-threatened store

Community group has six months to raise cash needed

BY JENNY BROWN

VILLAGERS fighting to save their only shop from closure want to become its new owners.

The Co-op in Hallbankgate, near Brampton, has been given community asset status, meaning members of the community group rallying to save it have six months to raise about £100,000 to secure its future.

The shop, which is being sold by owner Scotmid as a going concern until April, has been open for more than 100 years and villagers are not prepared to lose it.

Of some 450 questionnaires, sent to every household in the parish, more than 200 were returned with 76 per cent supporting the need for a shop.

A bid to secure £20,000 of initial investment from Farlam Parish Trust has been submitted to the parish council.

John Foster, chairman of Hallbankgate Hub – the group set up in light of an announcement that the shop could face closure – said it was an important stage.

“We’re hoping for strong support from them for what is obviously an important need, not just for Hallbankgate, but Farlam parish as a whole and the area around,” he said.

“People use this shop, not just in the immediate vicinity, but coming down from Alston and quite a lot of the hinterlands. This is the only shop between Alston and Brampton.

“We welcome the declaration of community asset status because that gives us more time if we need it and is another demonstration of how important this facility is for the area. On the whole we’re feeling very positive about it.”

The group intend to meet with owner Scotmid as soon as possible and hope to begin purchase negotiations by the end of March in an effort to



Rallying around: John Foster, chairman of Hallbankgate Hub which is trying to save the village's convenience store. 'We welcome the declaration of community asset status because that gives us more time if we need it and is another demonstration of how important this facility is for the area,' he said
JONATHAN BECKER

minimise any period of shop closure.

Mr Foster added: “If we got parish trust funding we would be able to proceed substantially with the bid because Scotmid has indicated they would be able to phase our payments of the purchase price.”

Meanwhile, the committee is continuing to look at other sources of funding and has plans to hold an open afternoon in coming weeks to create more awareness of the project and gain local support.

While the community asset status gives the group more time to raise funds, which means it cannot be bought by anyone other than the local community, it does not guarantee that the shop will stay open.

It has been owned by Edinburgh-based Scotmid, the firm that runs Lakes and Dales Co-operative, since 2013 but due to a low turnover said it would be forced to close the shop if a buyer is not found.



Support: Penrith and the Border MP Rory Stewart with villagers outside the Hallbankgate store

Closure would mean five jobs lost as well as post office services and a library link.

Plans for the shop will continue to see it as a hub offering a variety of services to villagers and visitors.

Part of the plan is to “make it more than just a shop”. The original services will remain and it could include a cafe and IT services.

“It’s a chance to put things

there that haven’t been in the village before,” said Mr Foster.

The intention is to invite the community to buy shares in the business. To make this possible the group expects to become a society for the benefit of the community in the next couple of months.

Penrith and the Border MP Rory Stewart has also given the group his backing, something Mr Foster said was

important. Mr Stewart, who has supported community ventures in the past, said: “I encourage everyone to support the hub because everyone can benefit from what it will be able to offer. I encourage people to buy shares and dividends when the time comes”.

Hallbankgate Hub is receiving advice from the Plunkett Foundation which has pledged a donation of about £2,000 for any immediate legal or survey costs.

“We feel very heartened that we’ve managed to get so far,” said Mr Foster. “There’s an awful lot of activist support that has emerged from the community and a lot of people are doing unpaid graft to make this thing happen. It’s all come together in a very encouraging way.”

Farlam parish council is due to consider Hallbankgate Hub’s funding bid on Wednesday.

For more details visit www.hallbankgatehub.org.