

£30,000 grant joy for village's hub

Hallbankgate gets countryside fund tonic

BY JENNY BROWN

TENS of thousands of pounds is being ploughed into a project to reopen and revive a rural village shop in north Cumbria.

The group, which has been working to open Hallbankgate's only shop, has been granted £30,000 from The Prince's Countryside Fund.

It is the second major batch of funding awarded to Hallbankgate Hub Ltd in less than a year.

The hub got a £70,000 Power to Change grant from the Big Lottery Fund in October and a month later became the shop's new owners.

Members are delighted as it means their project could be realised sooner than expected with work due to begin in the next few weeks.

"We were extremely chuffed and very pleased indeed," said Hallbankgate Hub chairman John Foster. "What this means is, if you look at it in the round, the hub which has only been in existence for just under a year has brought £100,000 worth of external funding into Hallbankgate and the local area and that's very encouraging."

Steve Bowles, hub secretary, said the difference this grant will make is "enormous".

It means the project is finally starting to gather speed after what was a long drawn-out process towards completing the sale in November.

"It would have certainly been harder [without this grant]. The Power to Change £70,000 made the difference between being able to open it and not, but this means we can do it much more quickly and with more confidence that we'll be able to get the whole thing up and running within the time frame," said Mr Foster.

"It's good news all round.



At the hub: Some of the shareholders taking over the shop at Hallbankgate. From left, John Foster, chairman of the hub, Peter Lloyd, and Isla Bober with her children Ivy, left, four, and Ezra, two

Another thing about the Prince's Countryside award is that it gives us a great deal more elbow room for contingencies."

Architect Tim Brown, of Hayton-based Ashton Design, has already drawn up the plans and the hub is in negotiations with contractors. Alterations will be completed through a mixture of voluntary and paid workers.

About £17,000 of the latest grant has been earmarked for supplementing the costs of refurbishment which has a budget of almost £50,000.

It will go towards transformation of the shop into a community hub – complete with post office, library services, cafe and information point – as well as services, equipment and training.

The Co-operative, which had served its community for more than 140 years, closed last June because its former owner, Scotmid, said it was no longer making a profit.



John Foster: 'We were extremely chuffed'

More than 60 people have expressed an interest in volunteering, which is something Hallbankgate Hub's business model relies on to make the shop viable.

Mr Foster added that they were pleased to have kept people's interests alive after a process that was considerably longer than they had hoped.

Hallbankgate Hub suc-

cessfully raised a further £70,000 after more than 110 shareholders invested and Farlam Parish Trust donated £13,000.

The Prince's Countryside Fund granted the money and expects 2,000 people will benefit from the hub.

Claire Saunders, director, said: "The fund is delighted to be able to support such a wide range of innovative projects to so many communities.

"Farming and rural businesses have been hit hard in the past 12 months as a fall in commodity prices and increased administrative burdens have taken their toll, notwithstanding the devastation of storms and subsequent flooding.

"As well as dealing with the immediate pressures we are committed to supporting communities to provide vital services and inspire the next generation to develop the skills and experience to live and work in the countryside."