

Distington is situated on the west coast of Cumbria about five miles equidistant between Whitehaven and Workington, with a population of just under 2,000 residents.

Distington, like many large West Cumbrian villages, lacked provision of fit-for-purpose affordable homes for older people, but when a plot of land at the heart of the village became available the community pulled together to take action.

Background

Distington Big Local is one of 150 Big Local areas in England that secured Big Lottery investment to the tune of £1 million to improve our local community and create a positive legacy for future generations.

Distington Big Local is made up of a board of volunteer directors, nearly all are local residents. The board decide how money is spent, following recommendations from the 3 volunteer-led sub groups: Residents Wellbeing & Community Group; Young People & Families Group; and the Land Development Group. In addition to volunteers, we have the following staff members: Project Manager, Project Assistant, Village Maintenance Person and a Summer Village Maintenance Assistant.

Distington has an aging population and with it a growing need for fit-for-purpose, affordable housing for older people. Both the village's care homes have closed down meaning local residents had to leave the village if their home became no longer suited to their needs.

The Project

In 2016, a 1.7 acre plot of derelict land in Distington's centre, formerly owned by the British Legion, came up for sale. Residents approached Distington Big Local to see if we could buy the land for the village.

In April 2016 we organised a public meeting where the community unanimously agreed this is indeed what should be done. In order



*The Legion land at the heart of Distington village
(Photo: DBL)*

to own the land as an asset we had to become a legal entity, so in June 2016 we registered as a Ltd Company (a company limited by guarantee) and were one of the first Big Locals to do so. In December 2016 we successfully bought the land for £82,000 (including legal fees) with Lottery funding.

We are now in the process of converting to a Community Benefit Society which is a more appropriate legal entity for the development. Next was the question of exactly what to do with the land. The Land Development Group was set up and it was vital all voices were heard before a decision was taken - cue a series of detailed consultations and surveys.

What has been achieved?

We appointed specialist architect and designers Halsall Lloyd Partnership - who have lots of experience in Community Led Housing - to assist with our ongoing community consultation. A wide range of ideas from Astroturf to allotments were mooted, but the overwhelming majority voted in favour of housing for older people.



A design meeting with the architect (Photo: DBL)



Land Development Group receiving the ACT Geoff Brown Innovation Award in 2019 (Photo: ACT)

We were successful in gaining match-funding (from Copeland Community Fund, Copeland Borough Council and the National CLT Network) for a more detailed community consultation and feasibility study working with industry specialists.

The result of which was a scheme of 54 new housing units for over 55s, future-proofed in case residents develop dementia or physical impairments. The final development is likely to be a mixture of supported housing flats and independent-living bungalows.

Following community approval, we applied to Homes England for a revenue grant from their Community Housing Fund and were awarded £157,493 to help pay for the costs of getting planning permission. The total cost of which was c.£200,000. We submitted our scheme for full planning in March 2020. We are currently busy establishing a relationship with our chosen Registered Provider and are looking to start building work in late 2020.

The Learning

Don't be afraid to think big. It requires hard work and determination and there will be many hurdles to jump over and decisions to be made. It's certainly not easy or simple, but is most definitely rewarding.

The volunteers work very hard, giving many hours of their time to attend meetings, events and training and make a lot of (often very difficult) decisions.

Housing is complex; you don't know what you don't know until you are on the journey. We are working with industry professionals to help realise our aims, there are many different aspects to a project like this that require specialist skills, so they have proved invaluable to us. None of us have a background in housing so don't be put off if you don't either!

Sue Hunter, Chair of the Land Development Group: "This has been an amazing experience for me. I might add that I had no experience in this field at all, so it has been a very steep learning curve! This has taken a lot of hard work, but I am extremely proud of what we have achieved so far, and truly believe that this development will be a flagship not only for Distington, but for the whole area".

Contact Details

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