

Brenchley Post Office & village shop – the last chance. Call for managers / investors

Brenchley & Matfield Parish Council (PC) will include a discussion on the future of the Post Office/village shop in Brenchley at the Annual Parish Assembly to be held on March 8, 2024 at 7.00 pm in the Brenchley Memorial Hall.

The recent survey indicated strong support for a shop remaining (90% + of responses) but most people said it would be dependent on the Post Office remaining as that is the main reason for them using it now. It must be remembered that once Chris and Andy leave the Post Office, as it stands, will not be able to operate as it does now, with very much reduced income from that activity thereafter, even if a continuing PO can be agreed at all.

The PC doesn't have the necessary expertise or capacity nor is it the right entity to run a community shop – but it is willing to assist in helping to secure the grants available. **If the parish wants to see a continued retail presence in Brenchley, then people will have to come forward now** to structure an owning company (e.g. a charity/Community Interest Company/Community Benefit Society etc.), raise funds and commit to the future management and day-to-day running of the shop. A viable and sustainable business plan needs to be built to qualify for grants and there are time limitations on the availability of such grants so swift action is needed. The amount of funding required would be very considerable if the shop and its accommodation are to be purchased and run successfully.

The Options:

1. **Buy the shop space:** The owners of the Old Palace have made an offer for the PC to purchase the shop area on a long leasehold basis. We estimate that the cost of purchasing the property, legals, and fit-out would be approx £70-75,000. Grants of around half that could potentially be obtained leaving a **minimum funding requirement of £35,000**. In addition, and depending on the business model, there would be further funds required for stock and working capital. If the plan requires a full-time shop manager, for instance, then further working capital would be required to pay salary and other employment costs (Ide Hill community store reports £32,000 for a full time store manager). Note that up to £9,000 of grants may be available towards the initial running costs.
2. **Buy the shop and accommodation:** No price has been agreed with the owner, but given the prices of the Old Palace flats that have been put on the market, we have estimated that the cost could be between £450,000 and £500,000 plus costs. Grants for projects of greater than £250,000 need to demonstrate a strategic benefit to the community, which we do not think would be applicable for this purchase. With the potential grant therefore capped at £200,000, the necessary **fund raising would be a minimum £270,000-£350,000** depending on the agreed purchase price.

This includes 5% stamp duty on the purchase price in excess of £250,000 but excludes working capital for fit-out, stock, manager costs etc.

We recognise that either option is a very considerable commitment, especially in the current economic environment, but a decision has to be reached soon, either to proceed with one of the two options outlined above or to accept that the shop will close when Chris and Andy King leave.

We would invite suitably motivated and experienced individuals who would like to lead or take part in this challenge to make contact at the earliest opportunity in advance of the APA to explore this further.

If no one does come forward, the village shop, as well as the Post Office, will be lost when Chris and Andy leave.

If you are interested, please contact the Parish Clerk or either of the Councillors identified below.

Thank you!

Chantal Brooks, Parish Clerk – clerk@brenchleyandmatfield-pc.gov.uk

Jonathan Buttery, Chair – Jonathan.buttery@brenchleyandmatfield-pc.gov.uk

Andrew Dewdney, Vice-Chair – Andrew.dewdney@brenchleyandmatfield-pc.gov.uk