

People power throws village a lifeline

EADT 04 March 2004

A VILLAGE once labelled "dead and buried" after seeing nearly all its amenities close down has been thrown a lifeline thanks to its thriving community spirit.

In the past four years the people of Monks Eleigh, near Sudbury, have watched all its amenities, apart from one village pub, close down.

Some residents claimed it was the "final nail in the coffin" when its village store and post office, which had served the parish for more than a century, shut up shop last year.

But just a year on, residents are celebrating the opening of a new, non-profit making community shop - including sub post office - which is confidently expected to help the village recover from one of the most difficult and gloomy periods in its long history.

And the initiative has already been heralded as the "way to go" for Suffolk's rural communities.

Wil Gibson, chief executive of Suffolk ACRE, which has supported it, said: "We recognise that a lot of communities are losing their post offices and shops like Monks Eleigh. Although something is not commercially viable it can be community viable.

"Setting things up as a co-operative or a community-run project tells people that there is an option so they do not have to lose their services."

Alarm bells first started to ring when one of the two village pubs, The Bull, closed in 2000. In 2002, the owners of Willows Garage decided to close the petrol station there because it could not compete with out of town supermarket prices.

The biggest blow to the community was last year when the village post office and store closed after failing to make a profit for several years, leaving the Swan Inn as the only facility left in the parish.

However, thanks to the dogged determination of local people it has now managed to open the Community Shop, which will provide vital amenities - including a sub post office - for the villagers.

Last year a village steering committee was formed in a bid to open a new shop. The group managed to secure a number of grants to fund the £53,000 needed for the venture and yesterday parish chairman Janet Every cut the ceremonial ribbons to declare the shop officially open.

It will be run by a band of 40 volunteers from the local community, who will staff the shop seven days a week. Where possible, products and produce found on the shelves will be sourced locally.

Carol and Nigel Ramsbottom, who own the Swan Inn, donated a former barn in the village centre to be used for the venture.

Although the shop was officially opened yesterday, it has been operating for several weeks and it is already hoped it may provide enough money to build further village amenities.

Vice-chairman of the Community Shop project Barbara Simms said: "This shop was made possible by the community for the community. Before this scheme we were left with nothing and the place was dead. The shop is vital to provide people with the services they desperately need.

"This is a completely non-profit making venture and all profits will go back into the running of the shop and go towards other causes in the village. We need to make around £600 a week to break even but so far because the community is being so supportive we are taking a £1,700 a week. That may allow us to fund other projects in the future, such as a new village hall."

And Mr Gibson stressed the importance of such facilities in helping community spirit.

"The community shop provides a wider role than simply providing a local newspaper.

"People come into the shops and are kept fully included, particularly the elderly. It gets them out of the house and they feel a lot different, so there is the social side of keeping these facilities in the community. For us, it is critical to maintain them."

Peter See, manager of the Suffolk Community Enterprise Project, which provides business advice and support to communities, said: "Monks Eleigh is a terrific demonstration that a community acting together can provide the services which are essential to keep a village or any community alive.

"If you take away the village pub and post office the communities do lose their natural focus and it becomes more difficult for residents in the community to meet on just a social basis.

"When you start losing services like this, from a community point of view, it ceases to exist and it compounds all the problems of rural isolation.

"Monks Eleigh is a marvellous demonstration that communities at large do not have to sit back and accept that the closures of these services are inevitable."