

Bluebell Public House
Notes from public comments at the Public Meeting held on 15.01.2020
Venue: Stoke Ferry Village Hall, Lynn Road, Stoke Ferry

Number present: 83

Apologies from two residents and a member of the West Norfolk branch of the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA)

This meeting was chaired by Jim McNeill, notes on the meeting were taken by Sue Lintern.

Jim McNeill (JM) confirmed with all present their acceptance for photos to be taken and advised all those wishing to be kept informed on this project to sign up to the mailing list. He also identified a member of the press. He notified everyone that his view was that the Parish Council would, in principle, support any group or individual who came forward with plans to keep the Blue Bell premises as a community asset i.e. as a pub/licenced café/place of employment/other community use.

An overview of the current situation was provided by JM:

When the Bluebell was originally put up for sale the Parish Council had successfully applied for the premises to be registered as an Asset of Community Value (ACV)

Subsequently the pub was purchased by Oxygen 56 Ltd who assured the Parish Council that they had a tenant to run the pub. Therefore the ACV was not followed up. There had also been another party interested in purchasing the pub but this was for a leather workshop/café, not a pub. Afterwards the new owners advised the Parish Council that the tenant they had lined up had pulled out and they had not been able to find another one. It was then that they have applied for planning permission to change the use of the Bluebell to that of a private residence. The planning application was turned down on December 12th, 2019. Oxygen 56 is currently appealing this decision. Meanwhile the Parish Council has reapplied for an ACV to be put in place.

There was a show of hands for the pub retaining its function as a pub/community workplace/café/business. A large majority were in favour.

JM introduced Mr Andrew Wright (AW)

Andrew is interested in investing into the Bluebell. He would potentially be buying the pub and having a manager to run it but so far has not written a business plan to take this further. The Bluebell could potentially be a 'destination pub' that was a family friendly, community pub. AW is interested in hearing what people have to say and ideas from the community. He said he would need to look at what will make people support the pub and he would like to participate in future developments of this project, there may be a possibility of co-ownership/shares as well as a possibility of expansion of the premises. AW was originally looking at 2 years ahead but may now accelerate this.

Those present were invited to ask questions of AW:

Q. Why does he think it will work when others have failed?

A. AW believes by owning the pub outright and not leasehold he has better control. He also has some experience of turning a pub into a destination pub. The pub would be quality food but not a high-end restaurant. He would need to build a reputation as a Community pub.

Q. Would there be Community involvement?

A. There would need to be a core business but yes also a large amount of engagement with the Community.

Q. Would there be a pool table/darts etc?

A. As he wishes it to have a food orientation, this was not the direction AW was thinking to go in at this time. A previous owner of the Pub mentioned that locals did not use the pub regularly. He advised the pool table was a good source of revenue. AW was aware that ambience is important and understands the need for caution for this to be a viable business.

Q. What are the numbers? Is it financially viable?

A. The pub is for sale at £220,000 and would need £100,000 of work doing to it.

Q. Would the pub be child friendly?

A. Yes, a family pub, but would have to look at space for outdoor play area. There needs to be a business balance between families with children and those without.

Other issues raised

A member of public suggested those present also look at other legal structures for a pub including the establishment of an Industrial Provident Society.

S106 money coming into the Parish would not be viable as a source of money as there are constraints on how s106 money can be spent.

Alternatives to private ownership

JM advised that there is a need to consider other options in case AW did not buy the pub. Further options to look at include a Community buyout. If the ACV application is successful there will be approximately six weeks for a group of residents to present an outline proposal to the Borough Council. If the business proposal is accepted, then a more complete business fundraising plan will need to be developed. The business model for community pubs shows there have not been any failed community pubs.

JM gave further general information about Community-owned pubs:

Figures from 2017 show this sector grew by 30% with 14 new pubs opening during the year. In 2017 there are 85 known Community pubs trading across the UK.

The average set up cost was £337000 and 74% of all start up costs came from community shares. Grants are available to aid in the purchase. Interestingly 3 pubs subsequently transferred out of community ownership and were then sold on to private individuals and this is another option that is available.

In the majority of cases the local community would purchase the **freehold** of the pub in order to retain the community control of the asset. Once owned, the community have the option to either run it themselves or have a paid manager or run by volunteers. There are a range of legal entities, but the majority are registered as an Industrial Provident Society. Profits can be re-invested in the premises and/or donated to community projects. Stoke Ferry has had support from the community campaign around The Crown at Northwold and from The King's Arms at Shouldham.

One member of the public stated he was an experienced bars manager and would be prepared to run a community pub.

JM then introduced Ian Skinner, Manager of The King's Arm, Shouldham

IS gave a brief overview of The King's Arms and its status as a successful Community-owned pub with the status of an Industrial Provident Society.

A village group in Shouldham started the process in 2013 and it took 2 years to set up. They now have 200 investors with share ownership ranging from £50 to £10,000.

There are safeguards for shareholder investment with accounts being overseen by the financial regulator. Tax relief was the biggest draw for potential investors.

Initially, the group started getting pledges, including from people who do not necessarily live in the village, prior to turning those pledges into share purchases.

Shareholders have an AGM, with all shareholders having one vote regardless of their number of shares.

They were profitable from year one. The King's Arms now employs a manager although when they started 80% of the work involved in running a pub was undertaken by Committee members.

Profits are capped and any excess is ploughed back into the village. The Committee make all the decisions on the direction of the pub's development and the manager is responsible for day-to-day running.

A general question was asked about the Duke's Head being an option for a Community pub but JM explained that would not be possible as any ACV application has to provide evidence the premises has been a business in the 'recent past'; i.e. in last few years.

A show of hands was given for the following options

- How many would buy shares in a community pub – 31
- How many would be willing to be on the running committee – 15
- How many would like the pub to be run as a private pub – 58
- If there was a proposition for AW to co-own, (having a majority share) with the community how many would be interested in buying minor shares – 38

Next steps

1. Firstly, residents need to know if the ACV is re-instated by the Borough Council.
2. If it is, there would be a second public meeting at which Ian Skinner and Committee members from the King's Arms will be invited to give a presentation to interested members of the public.
3. A Working Group would need to be set up to carry out the necessary initial work involved in setting up a Community-owned pub (or other identified community use).
4. This Working Group would need to organise a questionnaire to the whole village and the wider community to find out what people want from their pub/community asset.
5. As well as through a mailing list, information and updates could be posted on the Parish Council website, notice board, Stoke Ferry Market Place Facebook page, the Village Pump and through the mailing list developed on the evening.