

## Crown & Cushion Meeting- 28<sup>th</sup> March 2022 – 7.30pm Little Gransden Village Hall

**Nick Collett:** Welcome – Thank you all for coming!

(Housekeeping was covered)

I have some people on Zoom but this is only pointing at the panel. Minutes are being taken and will be circulated afterwards.

This is not a Village against the Landlords of the Crown and Cushion, but a support of the pub and how we can make it successful again. I have called this meeting very much as an opportunity for you all to voice your concerns and share your comments.

I have been in a very fortunate position where I have heard many views thoughts, anger and rumours-the facts are not substantiated in some of these cases, but I thought I would share the ‘feelings’ I have been fortunate enough to witness. I have some guests to introduce and then I will give a bit of background on what has happened. I hope this is all helpful.

### Thank you’s

- Cllr Stephen Ferguson – a District Councillor who is passionate about pubs being open
- Ray London from CAMRA – which is The Campaign for Real Ale a very important lobbying group
- All those who have offered assistance in many ways
- Those who have made and delivered leaflets
- Those who have contacted the council
- Everyone for attending and joining through Zoom
- and for signing onto the list

### I thought I would start with Why do we need a pub

#### What you have said

- Meeting place for locals
- A place to wind down
- A place to help integrate newcomers
- Community gathering point
- Music nights – missed by so many of you
- Revellers performances and a meeting place
- Meeting place for clubs/ award ceremonies
- A place where villagers who are on their own, are meeting other people

### Some more sombre thoughts

- If you don’t use it you will lose it
- Another villager said ‘*why are we trying to take away their home?*’ to precis many comments emailed to me in answer to this point- ‘they sold their home and bought a business, that is protected as an asset of community value’.
- No one was given the chance to vote on whether the pub stays closed. This is a village pub and an asset of community value – what is the point of an ACV if the pub is allowed to shut
- One Villager commented on what would happen if The Chequers landlords decide to retire - there could be no pub in either village!
- We really need to be aware of what this pub closure will mean to us, as villagers if we do nothing.

## **Some info and Statistics – I am sure Ray from CAMRA will have many many more!**

- Sara Beeny's property company carried out a survey found between 23 and 35% of house buyers are looking for a nearby pub or bar (depending upon age)
  - David Henderson from Strutt and Parker stated a good pub will positively affect property prices
  - Savilles suggested 1/3 of rural purchasers wanted a pub in their village.
  - Pubs are a rural employer, many locals, young and old have worked behind the bar and helped in the pub
  - House of Common Pub statistics April 2021
  - 'Public houses, or pubs, are an important part of the UK; they improve community engagement and are the third most popular activity for tourists.'
- All of these are a good reason why we need the Crown and Cushion open

## **What has happened – a very brief history**

- With the previous Landlords, we had a successful pub for six years, 3 years re-investing in its own infrastructure and 3 years of profits.
- 2013 the Crown and Cushion won a CAMRA award for best improved pub.
- They had Successful music nights and food
- Due to retirement and personal reasons the pub was sold to current Landlords

## **The pub does work, with the right guidance:**

- 4 years ago, the pub was purchased, for various reasons the current landlords stopped food and Music and closed at the beginning of lockdown, not to re-open.
- I have asked them for further comment, but none has been forthcoming.
- I believe I am speaking for you all when I say, 'We want it open again!'

## **The legal position:**

### Asset of Community Value

- We currently have this status, but this needs renewing, this year.
- (I have heard rumours NOT SUBSTANTIATED from a number of sources that when the Parish Council is up for election, a number of councillors are standing down and some 'friends' of the landlord will be standing in their places. If there are 5 positions available and only 5 candidates, there will be no vote necessary and they will just assume the vacancies) if true, this could strongly influence the Parish Councils ability to make decisions regarding the Crown and Cushion. Again, I have heard a rumour that some of the retiring councillors may stand again in order to stop this and force some voting – I say this so you are aware, but again this only a rumour.
- As a positive note on this fact, I have also heard From The Plunkett Foundation (more on them later) that if just 21 people request Asset of Community Value status to be renewed, to the District Council, then this can be achieved, without the Parish Council.

Neighbourhood plan (NP)- enshrine the pub as part of the village future.

When adopted the NP has legal status. It will sit alongside the adopted Local Plan prepared by Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC) and together they will provide the statutory development plan for the parish of Great Gransden. The Local Planning Authority must follow what is in the NP when making decisions about planning applications in the area, subject to other material considerations.

Continuing on the legal position

#### **Enforcement:**

- Use of accommodation when not open -according to the excellent CAMRA Document 'When Pub Stays Shut: A Campaigning Guide:  
The use of the residential areas is only available when the pub is open – the Landlords should not be living in the pub whilst it is closed.
- They are in breach of the licencing laws as the previous bar areas have now been filled with personal furniture including but not limited to sofas, fish tanks, chairs, tables etc. which were not present when it was operating as a pub nor is it appropriate furnishing for a pub
- Changes to the listed building  
There are a number of issues which have been reported including Outbuildings that have been erected, without consent
- There is also the future possibility of a Compulsory Purchase Order, Councils are now obliged to take seriously all viable requests put to them by voluntary and community groups for the compulsory purchase of a threatened community asset. (CAMRA Guide)

#### **What we have done**

- Started this group and are holding our first meeting (lots gave apologies but want minutes and some are attending by zoom)
- 100 Households subscribed to this list
- Spoken with councillors, The Plunkett Foundation – MORE ON THEM IN A MOMENT, advisors and CAMRA.
- Written to the council Enforcement Officers about the breaches and Enforcement Officers poorly completed survey. They wrote in answer to one of our villagers:
- "My understanding is that this is not deemed as a community asset and therefore the council cannot restrict the choices of the owner regarding the continued running of the public house."
- "This (investigation) will now be closed."
- They have not investigated correctly or understood that we have ACV status. This has been corrected by a number of Villagers including myself
- Enforcement is now reviewing this investigation and will be brought in front of a panel on the 7<sup>th</sup> April
- I have tried to contact the current Landlords several times, but only as an individual.
- Invited them to tonight's meeting
- Asked if they would consider offers to sell – awaiting a response.

#### **Plunkett Foundation (A Charity for the support of Communities -with a department who specialise in rural pubs)**

- The Plunkett Foundation will support us
- They provide free specialist business advisors, helping to put together a business plan - experts in community pubs
- They have an impressive 99% success rate when the community pub follows their guidance
- It starts by completing a survey of the village population – what kind of pub, we the villagers want in the village.
- The survey results then help create a business plan based on what the village wants- a genuine pub for the village!

#### **Moving forward**

- **What has been offered already by you**
  - Committee support
  - Expertise -great wealth of experience and knowledge
  - Assistance in the future running of the pub
  - Funding interests
  - Musical and Revellers performance offers when open

- **What This Group can do**

- If anyone knows the current Landlords and can bring them to the table this would be great
- Everyone to message Huntingdon District Council regarding Asset of Community Value
- Everyone to message Huntingdon District Council regarding Enforcement – especially before the 7th April meeting
- Everyone to write to the Parish Council
- Everyone to message MPs
- Press involvement
- Stop the change of use, to a Domestic residence
- Publicity
- Compulsory Purchase order

- **The committee**

- I have some members who have put their names forward – it is very important that the committee reflects the views of the village and so as many members as possible would be great
- Rather than vote now, I will send an email to all members with a simple yes no to each prospective committee member
- If you would like to be on that list please let me know.

## Notes as taken on the night.

**Nick Collett- I would now like to welcome Cllr Stephen Ferguson -County Councillor, who has agreed to answer some questions.**

**Stephen Ferguson.** Currently County Councillor and running for District Councillor for St Neots at next election. He feels it is essential that we don't lose more pubs. Help is keen to help out in with this campaign, but stated it is a District Council matter and not County Council. Stephen emphasised the need to contact our new Councillors, who will be voted in at elections on 6th May, onboard to support this cause. Stephen can offer media clout on behalf of the group. There should be 2 candidates running for District Council.

Stephen advised he had offered to visit the current landlords, with Nick Collett, but they have not yet accepted the offer of a conversation. The group do not want to gang up on the family but have a discussion about how we can help them reopen the pub and support their business to make it successful for them and the village.

**Nick Collett- I would now like to welcome Ray London -CAMRA**

**Ray London – CAMRA (Campaign for real ale)**

Asset of Community Value- The Parish Council took the bull by the horns when they applied for this ACV 6 years ago, so there is no reason why there would be an issue this time. He also advised that it doesn't have to be the Parish Council that applies for the renewal of the ACV as an application from 21 residents as a committee can also be submitted. If pub comes up for sale, there is a 6 month moratorium to make a realistic offer for that premise, but the owners do not have to sell to the community.

The Plunkett foundation has all the expertise to assist with this situation and once we connect with them, if we follow their advice, we will have all the guidance we need.

The ACV is due for renewal July 2023, so he suggested we get the process underway ASAP, as HDC is running extremely slow.

Stephen- Parish Council is ideal to deliver ACV as it is seen as a democratic element of the community. It would be very unreasonable for HDC to reject.

**Raised point:** In reference to the rumour that supporters sympathetic to the pub remaining closed, may run for Parish Council to weight opposition against the ACV renewal, HDC have provided the new Model Code of Conduct to the Parish Councils, to be considered at the next Parish Council meeting for adoption. Two important points from the proposed code of conduct are:

- I impartially exercise my responsibilities in the interests of the local community
- I do not improperly seek to confer an advantage, or disadvantage, on any person

**Nick Collett- I will finish with next steps but let us now open the floor Questions, comments and other suggestions**

**Question:** *Have the current landlords submitted an application for change of use?*

Stephen advised that we keep a close eye on HDC planning application section of their website to raise an objection immediately. He has no evidence so far, that a change of use has been submitted.

**Raised point:** *I feel frustration that although it seems obvious that we have established that the current landlords are in breach of several HDC planning acts as well as their licence, HDC seems reluctant or unable to take enforcement action. This means the current landlords have no motivation to sell and no incentive to engage with the village about our concerns.*

**Stephen Ferguson:** He advised that although the owners are paying business rates which are substantially high, they are exploiting a loophole by simply remaining in the pub and not engaging. HDC are aware of issues of other buildings around the site and they should be enforcing. The problem is that District Council's planning teams are in crisis. They don't have man- power to come out to visit and all aspects of planning are failing as they are overwhelmed. We need to make ourselves the biggest irritation and not stop bombarding them using 'pointy elbows'.

**Nick Collett-** With the letters already sent by members of the village to HDC, we have definitely rattled the planning enforcement department and this noise needs to continue and be louder and constant.

**Raised point:** *It is important to look at all angles as well as a parliamentary lobby campaign. The law is tricky over forcing people to sell their property. We have to go about in the way we are going about it and ensuring we are speaking to MP's to making this a subject to be lobbied at house of parliament. Plunkett are a lobbying group and this is definitely a situation they get involved with. The advice we have been given is the correct route to take. We must put pressure on Planning enforcement and ensure they follow through. We will need short term goals and longer term goals.*

**Raised point:** *The Crown is bang in the middle of the conservation area. Can we also lobby the Conservation Department? The current use and state of the car park is not consistent with the visual requirements of a property in a conservation area. There is also concern of unapproved changes of a listed property. Need to start shouting now as loud as possible.*

**Action:** Everybody in the rooms needs to send in an email to HDC to both the planning department and the Managing Director.

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Managing Director  
Huntingdonshire District Council  
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**Andrea DOLLARD**  
Planning Enforcement Officer  
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**Question:** *How do we get Plunket on our side- what is the process?*

Ray advised that you just need to establish a link, which is what Nick has already made and if there are any specific questions, then go back to them directly. They deal with all community assets very successfully.

**Nick Collett-** We all need to communicate to HDC about the issues and I will send the minutes to represent everyone's views. We need to have vote on a committee and members, then at that point we will have a more impactful group representing the village. If we are a committee, rather than an individual, we can apply more enforcement pressure to get them to the table to talk. Unfortunately, we all have a single goal and there are hurdles that the current owners have put in the way. Without them talking to us, then this meeting has to occur and we have to invite specialist people in. Very soon, we would like to survey the village to ask the village what they want? What do they want from the pub? What do they like about the pub? What do they want from the pub now which may be different from pre-covid now more people work from home?

**Raised point:** *Nicks' comments that 'we' need to raise our concerns with HDC planning reiterating that 'we' means everybody in the group need to take that action personally and contact HDC! HDC enforcement has limited resources and while we may currently low on their list of priorities, the more complaints they received the higher up the list we will be moved. Council does not want a flood of outstanding complaints and will address them much quicker if we make more noise collectively.*

**Raised point-** *To follow on with the above point, if anyone is feeling uncomfortable by adding their voice to this cause, then think about the point that if the family would just speak with us, we wouldn't have to be in this room this evening, forming a committee. So if this is a barrier for you, then think of this as an action to engage the current owners and reopen the pub.*

**Raised point:** *The last landlords had 3 years of profitable books, with which the current owners had visibility to understand the turnover opportunity prior to sale.*

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- *I do not improperly seek to confer an advantage, or disadvantage, on any person*

**Raised point:** *Putting myself in their shoes, they may need to share their private financial situation, so we need to find someone who is a trusted mediator?*

**Nick Collett-** If anyone can make that link to get an understanding of what their plans are, we would welcome that help to engage with them.

**Raised point:** *We should be putting our efforts into both pubs and not to the detriment of the Chequers. Many of the pubs in the area, during Covid, tried many different ideas to stay open and keep trading in inventive ways, during lockdown. Some changed their outdoor areas to be more Covid compliant. Sadly, at the Crown, there does not seem to be the willingness to succeed. Again, we really need to have that conversation with them.*

**Stephen Ferguson-** If you would like media involvement, you would need an objective and create a splash. The media post should give the landlords a chance to come to the table.

**Point raised-** *You only have a 'first meeting' once, so we need to use this opportunity for the media splash and make it count.*

**Stephen Ferguson-** Stephen agreed with the above point raised. The media piece should say that the meeting took place, with 65+ people in attendance and that the group want to find an amicable solution to reopen the Crown & Cushion.

**Nick Collett- Next Steps – this will all be emailed with contact information**

- Make sure Neighbourhood plan updated to say how important the pub is to you
- Write to District Council regarding Asset of Community Value
- Try to start dialogue with Landlords
- Pursue the Enforcement officers regarding Breach of licencing
- Accommodation used whilst pub shut
- Bar area filled with personal effects
- Pursue the Enforcement officers regarding planning breach with out-buildings
- Write to our local candidate for upcoming elections (MPs)

Meeting close