

# GAZELEY PARISH COUNCIL

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## Record of the Extraordinary Planning Meeting of Gazeley Parish Council held on Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> August 2022 in Gazeley Village Hall at 7.30pm

**Present:** Cllr Paul Beard (PB) (Chair), Cllr Ray Francis (RF), Cllr Pat Spillane (PS), Cllr Robert Connelly (RC), Cllr Judy Moatt (JM) and Cllr Kevin Grimwood (KG)

**In attendance** Lynne Francis, Parish Clerk, and approximately 40 members of the public.

**Apologies:** Cllr Wesley Heaton

The meeting was opened by the Chairman, Cllr Paul Beard, who welcomed everyone to the meeting and indicated the exit routes from the building in case of an emergency.

The meeting had been called to discuss planning application **DC/22/0994/FUL**, Rebuild, extension and conversion of forge to create two dwellings. The Old Blacksmiths, The Street, Gazeley.

### Public Forum

The Chairman explained that the meeting had been called for residents to comment on the plans, in the event that they didn't have access to email or social media. Some residents had already sent their comments to the planning department. The Chairman outlined the plan and passed around diagrams to explain the proposals.

There was a shout of 'Why are you against it?' from the floor and the Chairman responded that the parish council had never said they were against it, it had never been discussed, and he asked where he'd got that impression. The same person then went on to make personal accusations against members of the parish council and he alleged that the council was also opposed to the applicant as well as the application but he had no evidence to back up his allegations.

The meeting continued.

**Q.** How long would the applicant have before commencement of the project?

**A.** The statutory period is three years from the date of the approval of an application and the Chairman confirmed that this was an area of concern in view of the length of time the building had been in such a state of dilapidation.

**Q.** Has there been a change of use application for the site.

**A.** It was confirmed that the application in itself does constitute a change of use application.

**Q.** How much land does the owner have inside the fencing?

**A.** It was confirmed that there is no land attached on three sides of the building. He owns the building itself and just the strip of land in front of it.

**Q.** If the application is turned down, what will happen to the land?

**A.** It was confirmed that even if a demolition order was to be enacted the owner will still own the land that the building stands on.

**Response.** The questioner observed that the owner could put anything he liked on the site if the forge was demolished, like piles of rubbish, so it's better to give the owner a chance to do something positive with it.

Some members of the audience seemed to be under the impression that the demolition order had been initiated by the parish council. The Chairman explained that the order was served by West Suffolk District Council after the building had started to collapse.

**Q.** If approval is given to the plan with two parking spaces in front of the forge, what's to stop the residents from parking at least four cars in the area?

**A.** It was noted that the Highways Authority has already requested that the proposed parking bays be enlarged to 7x3 metre bays.

**Q.** Do we know whether the foundations of the building need re-doing?

**A.** It was confirmed that there are no foundations to the building, the walls stand on earth, not on a concrete base. It has to be underpinned before any further work can be done.

A resident asked if this was the right time to express her view and on being reassured that it was, she said that she was not against the application, she would like to see it developed and would like to see it looking nice but she had concerns that the project might not be financially viable, in which case it was unlikely that it would be finished and the village would continue to be blighted by the site for a long time.

She also had concerns over the parking issues, two units could hold two couples which could potentially result in as many as four cars at the site, obscuring the visibility for drivers exiting Stubbins Lane.

Returning to the viability of the project, she noted that even if the owner obtained planning permission there was no guarantee that the units would actually be built within the statutory three year applicable period so what would happen at the end of the three years.

The clerk replied that the owner could re-submit the plans at any time within the three years and gain another three years and so on. Of course there is no guarantee that a second application would be approved.

There would also be a possibility that the site could be sold with planning consent attached.

Some members of the audience said that they couldn't understand why anyone would query the cost of the build and the Chairman replied that there was a fear that if costs ran away with the project it could be abandoned.

A resident complained that she had narrowly avoided an accident on several occasions at the junction of Stubbins Lane and The Street because vehicles parked on the road in front of the forge caused an obstruction.

There is no parking availability around the site because none of the houses surrounding the green had parking facilities on site so they all parked on the road. She said that the village needs to have the bus shelter back for the elderly and school-children who wait for the school bus there. She felt that if the owner is given a chance to complete the renovation then the facilities will be returned to the village.

**Q.** What is the relationship between the parish and the present owner? Is the parish council helping him develop it? Is the council putting up barriers to the owner? It seems that various pieces of information are circulating that may not be correct. Was the owner aware of tonight's meeting, did he make any representation to the parish council?

**A.** The owner has not been in contact with the parish council since he attended a meeting in April. The clerk has attempted to contact him through his solicitor, whose address he gave her, but he has not responded to the letter or a subsequent email. The parish council was seeking assurances from him on the matter of accessing the village green, which is the responsibility of Gazeley Parish Council, as custodians, on behalf of the parish.

**Q.** Why doesn't the parish council give this much attention to other applications for front porches, etc.?

**A.** The Chairman replied that most applications don't warrant that much attention but in the case of the forge, it has been a source of interest for so many residents and for so long that we took the decision to hold this meeting to give everyone a chance to give their opinion and to ask questions. Most applications are for domestic alterations to a residential dwelling. This application is for the change of use from a commercial building to a dwelling and that hasn't happened here before. The building is also central to the village, being situated on the village green.

Cllr Spillane confirmed that as a business owner he obviously has an interest in the future of the site and would prefer to see the building retained for commercial use. He feared that because of its close proximity to the pub, any future residents might be disturbed by noise from customers leaving late at night and it would give rise to complaints.

Cllr Spillane stressed that any comments he made were from a personal perspective only. He would not be party to any decision taken by the parish council on the matter.

**Q.** A resident commented that if the building was retained as a commercial premises, the parish council felt that it might have some control over it but in fact the council hasn't had any control over what has happened there. During the past eight years she had had sight of a man sleeping in there and hanging his washing in there but nothing had been done to prevent it.

**A.** There was not much any council could do to arrest the situation until the building started to collapse and at that point the district council stepped in and issued the demolition order on the property. The demolition order is still on hold until the application has been decided. If it is refused then the order could still be enacted at some point.

There was a further comment that residents don't understand why the parish council is holding up this application but the Chairman replied that this simply was not true. It's not the parish council's decision, it's the responsibility of the planning department and the parish council can only express a view.

A view was expressed that the parish council is giving off negative vibes against the project but once again it was reiterated that the parish council is just being very cautious. The Chairman confirmed that we have to consider the interests of the village as a whole. In his experience, meetings such as this usually resulted in a one-sided verdict, either for or against the matter in question because the people who felt most strongly either way were more inclined to attend the meeting.

A member of the public called for a show of hands of those who are in favour of the application and approximately 95% of those present at the meeting raised their hands.

Residents were reminded that they are able to express their opinion directly to the district council via the planning portal on the West Suffolk website, or by post, and their views will be considered by the planning officers along with the comments from the relevant authorities

At this point the Chairman drew the meeting to a close saying that it seemed that the consensus at the meeting was that most people there would like to see something done with the building, whether for commercial or residential use, to improve the appearance of the whole area.

It was agreed that the clerk will write a summary of the meeting and draft a response to the planning department on behalf of the parish council.

The meeting closed at 8.30pm.