

SAVE THE BULL ACTION GROUP

MINUTES OF THE INAUGURAL MEETING HELD ON 28 APRIL 2022 IN MUCH HADHAM VILLAGE HALL

Some 80 or so people were present at this meeting. Papers available were: an agenda; a draft constitution; a copy of the layout of the proposed development on the field to the rear of The Bull which Punch had submitted as a planning application; and an application form to join the proposed Save The Bull Action Group.

Item 1: Welcome, Introduction and Purpose of Meeting

2. Keith Birch welcomed everyone to the meeting, made some introductions and explained the purpose of the meeting. (His opening remarks are attached at Annex A.)

Item 2: The perceived threat to The Bull: Background

(a) The draft Neighbourhood Plan (NP)

3. Brian Caffarey spoke to the first part of this item: see the notes at Annex B.

(b) Punch's planning application, their recent management of the pub and Punch's future plans

4. Keith Birch spoke to the second part of this item: see his remarks at Annex C.

Item 3: Questions and Discussion

5. In discussion the following main points were made:

- A show of hands confirmed virtually unanimous support for the view that the pub had declined in recent years
- People needed to support the pub more since it was a vital asset and was improving again after a slow start following 'lockdown'
- Voting against the draft Neighbourhood Plan would be very dangerous since it would allow unwelcome development in the village. The Hill House site was not available at the time when the final proposals were prepared
- It was confirmed that it was not possible to change the draft NP now: all that remained was a 'yes' or 'no' vote in the referendum
- If the NP was passed as drafted it would not be possible to oppose in principle building houses on the field behind the pub: the purpose of allocating sites in the NP for development was to ensure that developers could be confident that building on those sites would be permitted and that any objections would have to focus on the details of the application
- The pub's problems were not caused by the draft NP and the proposed development: they had been apparent for a number of years

- The proposed development would impact on the pub because an access road would be driven through the present car park, dividing the 'beer garden', reducing the attractiveness of the outside space and limiting the scope for developing the pub's business
- Punch was now owned by a private equity group, Fortress. While Cllr Hunt maintained that the latter's interest was in growing the asset base, others disagreed, arguing that Punch, which owned the freehold of 90% of its pubs, had sold many pubs in the past and would continue to do so. It was common, too, for Punch and similar companies to sell off parcels of land where these could be 'carved off'.
- There was a suggestion that the Group should try to make Punch aware at a senior level of the reputational damage which could be caused by evidence of a negative impact on the community, but others maintained that Punch were very unlikely to be swayed by arguments of this nature, being focused on the 'bottom line'.

Item 4 – Proposal to set up a Save The Bull Action Group

6. Brian Caffarey introduced this item, reiterating that a properly-constituted group, which could claim to speak on behalf of a sizeable number of residents, would have more influence than arguments voiced individually. He asked for agreement in principle to the proposition to set up a Save The Bull Action Group and this was given overwhelmingly in a show of hands.

7. He then briefly ran through the main points in the draft Constitution which had been circulated, stating that it was based closely on those which had been adopted by very many community groups. The draft was agreed subject to amending the Aim of the Group to: 'To take any necessary action to help to ensure the continued existence of The Bull, Much Hadham, as a thriving pub'. The provisions regarding banking would also be reviewed to ensure that they were appropriate for online banking.

8. The following were then elected to fill three of the officer posts on the Management Committee:

Chair – Keith Birch

Secretary – Brian Caffarey

Treasurer – Bob Cheshire

9. Several nominations were made to fill the remaining four posts on the Management Committee. Those joining the Group would be asked to agree subsequently to the election of people to fill the remaining posts.

10. It was agreed that the annual subscription should be fixed at £5 per person, to be reviewed at the first AGM. This would be collected later when a bank account had been opened.

11. Those who wished to join were invited to fill in the application form which had been provided. It was emphasised that the data collected would be used only for the purpose of communicating with members; it would not be passed on to third parties; and it would be

deleted when someone left the Group. A data privacy notice would be prepared and issued to members.

Item 5 – Application to make The Bull an Asset of Community Value (ACV)

12. Jamie Snary said that there were three primary benefits of an ACV:

- Community right to bid: a moratorium imposes a pause on a sale for up to 6 months to allow the local community a chance to raise funds and submit an offer to purchase the property. The owner, however, is under no obligation to accept the offer or for the community to be treated as a preferential bidder. Nor does it require the owners to sell at a discount
- Material planning consideration: although not part of the enacted legislation, the ACV status may be a material consideration in a planning application and may be used by the local planning authority and the Planning Inspectorate as a factor in refusing planning permission for full or partial change of use or demolition
- Compulsory purchase rights: an ACV-registered building can be compulsorily purchased by the local authority or council "if the asset is under threat of long-term loss to the community".

13. Jamie confirmed that the proposal was to submit an application as soon as possible. A draft had been prepared and was currently with Alex Simion at The Bull in order to check that it covered all the events at the pub and the groups who regularly use it. The names of 21 electors were needed to accompany the application and Jamie invited people who were content to do so to provide the necessary details at the end of the meeting.

14. In response to a question from the floor, Jamie confirmed that the present intention was to apply for an ACV for the whole of The Bull site.

Item 6 – Conclusion of Meeting

15. Keith Birch thanked everyone for attending the meeting, which had demonstrated how many people valued The Bull. Those joining the Group would be kept in close touch with developments. He also asked anyone who thought that they might be able to help the Group in any way to get in touch with the Secretary.

1 May 2022

ANNEX A

Welcome, Introductions and Purpose of Meeting (Keith Birch)

Welcome, and many thanks to the many who have attended and apologies for the tightness of space.

You have all no doubt seen 'The Save the Bull' flyer. These have been hand delivered to every single house in the Parish by a small team of concerned residents. Our concerns centre on the on-going viability of The Bull should Punch Pub's application to build 6 dwellings on the field behind The Bull receive planning approval.

My name is Keith Birch and I am one of those concerned residents. As background, my wife Tessa worked at Hopleys for over 12 years before it closed in December 2019. Tessa and I also provided some of the start-up finance for Fiona Copley's successful Hopleys Café.

Firstly, some introductions. we have a number of initial founders of the Action Group team here tonight. At this front table we have Brian Caffarey and Jamie Snary. In the hall we also have Martin Dillon and we are all desperate to help Save the Bull.

We also have three further members of the team who can't be with us this evening. They are Graham Newton, Paul King and Bob Cheshire. It was actually Graham who galvanised us all into action when the plans to develop the land behind The Bull were first announced.

So, why do we need to protect The Bull? I'm sure we all miss Fiona's Hopleys café. It may only have ran for 7 years but in this time it became a much-loved village facility. My concern is that we may be sleep walking to a similar position with The Bull, a facility that has been a vital part of village life for nearly 300 years.

The founders of the Action Group are determined to try and Save The Bull but we are a small group. With your active support we can be so much louder and stronger and act as a real force for change.

We believe that Punch, the current owners, have underinvested in The Bull in recent years. As a result it is a less attractive destination compared with other, more vibrant pubs in the area. Our fear is that The Bull may experience further decline if Punch's plans get the go-ahead. If we don't act now, The Bull's future could be out of our hands. We therefore need your support.

ANNEX B

The perceived threat to The Bull: Background

The draft Neighbourhood Plan (Brian Caffarey)

We see three main threats to the future of The Bull:

- First, the fact that the draft NP allocates the field behind the pub as a site for housing. We believe this is unnecessary since the Hill House site (the former Barn School) is now available for development and seems highly likely to be built on even though the site is only a reserve site in the draft NP
- Second, the specific planning application which Punch has submitted, picking up on the 'green light' given in the draft NP. We think the proposed development is likely to have a negative impact on the pub's viability
- Third, the fact that the pub has been allowed to run down in recent years, increasing the fear that, having pocketed a great deal of money from the sale of the field, Punch will decide sooner or later that the pub is no longer viable and decide to close it

The Draft Neighbourhood Plan

- Apologies to those who've followed this closely. But, putting it very simply:
- Much Hadham has to find 54 new houses in the period 2017 to 2033
- Reduces to 33 houses because some already built or being built
- Parish Councils were invited to draw up Neighbourhood Plans to identify sites. Able to alter village development boundaries to allow new sites to be built on
- Various possible sites identified during original consultation, including the land at Hill House
- This site was a relatively popular choice: big enough to provide some affordable housing (a Parish Council (PC) priority but not realised in the draft NP) and with some possible community benefits e.g. public open space. But site not available at the time, so other sites needed to make up the numbers
- PC struck a deal with Punch that, in return for allocating the field at the rear of The Bull for housing, Punch would build at least 5 'downsizing' bungalows
- Some objections made but PC decided to include site in final proposals
- PC submitted draft NP to East Herts Council (EHC) on 9 February 2021. Next stage then: further consultation by EHC and scrutiny by independent Examiner. Latter's role essentially to check compliance with national and District policies and to make sure process has been carried out properly

- In April 2021 a housebuilding company informed PC of completion of purchase of Hill House site and plans for some 30 houses on south-east corner of site, including affordable housing.
- Examination of NP delayed for various reasons: didn't properly start till October/November 2021
- February 2022: we urged PC to suspend examination so that Hill House site could be properly considered and Bull site withdrawn
- PC refused and Examiner's report produced last month. Predictably, no changes recommended re Hill House or Bull sites
- Next step: a local referendum on draft NP. Must get at least 50% approval of those who vote
- Not our purpose this evening to give a definitive view on the draft NP – which contains many other features – let alone to advise people how to vote. But expect formal Group, if established as proposed, to consider carefully the implications for the future of The Bull

ANNEX C

Punch's planning application, their recent management of the pub and Punch's future plans (Keith Birch)

In your pack there is a layout of Punch's development plans for the site. These have been submitted by Punch to East Herts planning. Their application has received many objections and may require modification before gaining final approval. Nevertheless, whatever changes are made, the access road to the development as shown will still need to carve through the current car park and gardens.

Many of us who frequent The Bull have noted little investment in its internal fabric compared with other pubs in the vicinity over the last 10 years or so. Many have commented on poor kitchen facilities, internal dining, the quality of the wines on offer, the state of the lavatories and also the outside areas. So, why is this? Is it the frequent changes of landlords in recent years? Or is it just the unwillingness of Punch to invest? It could also be Punch's business model which, like many other operators, obliges the Publican to repay the investment through higher rents. Not sure I would sign up for this, especially when the lease is only 5 years.

Personally, I suspect it's a mixture of all these factors. However, one thing that is apparent to us all, Much Hadham maybe be a thriving community but, unfortunately, The Bull isn't. We are therefore left with the growing fear that Punch may be more interested in developing the land behind The Bull rather than The Bull itself.

Personally, I think Alex Simion, the current Publican at The Bull, is doing a great job under the circumstances. However, without real investment, he is in limbo and has to play second fiddle to other more vibrant venues in the area, many of which are either free houses or have more supportive and flexible landlords. We also strongly believe that developing the land behind The Bull could further compromise The Bull. We know that the Parish Council are sympathetic to these issues but will be powerless to stop the development as it is now included in the draft Neighbourhood Plan.

There is also some debate as to how the land could be developed whilst still keeping both the car park and The Bull open. Punch and members of the Parish Council have tried to downplay this risk. Our strong view is that The Bull is already in a delicate commercial position and may struggle to keep trading whilst heavy building work is underway. We believe the reduction in trade or even any temporary closure caused by the development could have dire consequences for any pub, especially one that has suffered from under-investment for many years.

Punch Pubs are aware of tonight's meeting. In advance they wished to explain their plans for investing in The Bull and how this investment would benefit The Bull and perhaps the wider community. As a result, last week, Brian Caffarey and I together with certain members of the Parish Council had a Zoom meeting with Punch Pubs.

We were hoping to hear a real Win-Win proposal to include some form of planning gain from the sale of the land that would see a significant internal improvement to The Bull. Unfortunately, their presentation only suggested a modest improvement to the outside area which they stressed would still be contingent on gaining planning permission. To say that we and the Parish Council were underwhelmed by the proposal would be an understatement.

We wrote back to express our views that, on the basis of the current proposal, Punch may expect to face considerable community opposition to the planning application. We also politely suggested that Punch might wish to consider one of two options:

Option A As part of the planning gain from developing the Bull site, that Punch consider making a significant investment to the internal fabric of The Bull in addition to any proposed outside area improvements. Such investments being excluded from normal tenant rent review and repayment regimes.

Option B That Punch consider selling The Bull at an appropriate valuation and for it to then become a Community Pub.

We suggested that Option B may be the preferred option for the community.

I received a short response from Punch earlier today. They have reaffirmed their offer to enhance the outside space and *'that all options are being explored in order to support the pub'*. We will have to see if they come up with anything substantive. My fear is that Punch may stand their ground as they have an effective green light from the Neighbourhood Plan and will believe that will receive full planning in the fullness of time.

So what can we do? If Punch fail to properly address our issues, the community can object individually through the planning process as well as joining the proposed Save the Bull Action Group, who will be campaigning on your behalf. Alternatively, as a community, we will all have the opportunity to cast our vote for or against the Neighbourhood Plan in the upcoming Referendum. Let's hope that Punch come to the table with something concrete before the Referendum.