

Dear Member

I am writing to let you know that the Management Committee has decided against campaigning for a 'no' vote in the Neighbourhood Plan (NP) referendum on 23 June. The Committee is making no recommendation on how its members or other residents should vote: the decision – as, indeed, it was always bound to be – is entirely a matter for each individual to decide.

At the point when the Group was set up, the situation was that the draft NP allocated the field at the rear of The Bull for housing, with no accompanying benefit for the community apart from the contribution of a minimum of five houses towards the housing target which the Parish Council is required to meet by 2033. Our main concern was that the proposed development would do nothing to arrest the recent decline of the pub, which we felt had lacked investment, and indeed that the development might make the pub an even less attractive venue, with the risk that the pub itself might eventually be sold off as a residential property. The Group was established, therefore, with the aim of ensuring the existence of The Bull as a thriving pub.

There were, in theory, various possible ways of furthering that aim, all of which we have tried to keep in play for as long as possible. Many of us would have liked the opportunity to turn The Bull into a community-owned pub but it is clear that Punch, at present at least, are not willing to sell it. (If they ever did decide to sell it, the Asset of Community Value listing which we have applied for would at least give us a chance to put a bid together to buy it.)

Another option was to try to prevent the proposed housing development by voting 'no' in the referendum. For some of us, that argument was supported by the view that the Hill House (former Barn School) site was a much more suitable site for development than the various sites allocated in the draft NP, including the Bull site. But the advice we have received is that, even if the draft NP was rejected, we could not be sure that a planning application for the site would not succeed, and rejecting the draft NP would bring about much uncertainty in dealing with planning matters as well as possibly losing some of the useful additional protections it provides.

A third option was to press Punch Pubs to commit to investing in the infrastructure of the pub and not simply just reinstating the beer garden and car parking areas. As you will have seen from Brian Caffarey's email of 27 May, Punch did respond to the pressure which we exerted by making a commitment to invest in the kitchen, toilets and internal décor of the pub. They also plan to increase the number of car parking spaces and to refurbish the beer garden. These changes would all be subject to their gaining planning approval.

In further discussion with us Punch have confirmed that the proposed improvements would be funded by them and would not be recouped in increased rent from Alex Simion, the licensee. We have also been invited, along with a Parish Council representative, to a meeting in a few weeks' time to discuss in more detail the proposed changes and how they might be reflected in conditions attaching to planning approval.

The conclusion which the Management Committee has reached, therefore, is that, in bringing about a situation in which Punch have committed to investing in the pub's infrastructure, the Group – thanks to your great support – has achieved a good deal more than was originally on offer and all that we can realistically hope to achieve at present. In particular, we would not feel justified, in view of the uncertain planning outcomes, in advising our members and others to vote 'no' on 23 June and embarking on – a no doubt divisive – campaign to achieve that end.

Of course, the Group will scrutinise Punch's proposals as they come forward and we will ensure that Punch's commitments to invest in the pub are adhered to. We will also be making sure that we are ready to bid for the pub if the opportunity arises for a community buy-out at some point in the future. And we will also be doing our best, working closely with Alex Simion and his team at The Bull, to help to ensure that we have a thriving pub which serves the local community well. Our campaign has demonstrated how much the pub means to the village: let's all use it and help it prosper!

Kind regards

Keith

Keith Birch  
Chair  
Save The Bull Action Group

1 June 2022