

Stockland Community Pub Ltd (SCPL) – News September 21st 2017

The Public Hearing

Yesterday morning, a large number of people gravitated towards The Churchill Suite on the first floor of Axminster Guild Hall. In fact, so many members of the public wanted to get into the room that when proceedings began at 10.00am, the first thing the Inspector (Mr Neil Pope) announced was that the room was too small and that the hearing would have to decamp and reconvene in the main public hall on the ground floor.

When the hall was set up, and a radio microphone was in place, the Hearing began with Mr Pope taking us through some procedural points. Many in the hall complained of not being able to hear what was being said, and Mr Pope had to ask for more microphones, and there was another delay while a second radio mike was found.

So it was about 11.10 am when the Hearing proper finally got underway, and Mr Pope made some points around National and Local Planning Policy. Things livened up when he moved on to the impact of the loss of the pub on the social well-being of Stockland. From the floor, Cllr Richard Griffiths (Chair of Stockland Parish Council) delivered an electrifying address using the decline of the Stockland Cricket Club as an example of how the closure of the Kings Arms had a direct impact on local people's lives. He sat down to thunderous applause from the audience.

After the lunch-break, Wendy Urquhart gave another passionate speech regarding the decline of social well-being in the village which again was met with warm applause from the floor.

Most of the Hearing was inquisitorial, and I thought that Mr Pope was very even handed in dealing with the Appellant, EDDC representatives, and Dale Ingram representing SCPL. When he wanted an answer, he repeated his questioning in a polite manner until he got it – nobody was allowed to wriggle off the hook!

The Appellant was hard pressed to explain that the pub as it stands is 'not viable', and yet his own Traffic Report suggested that the volume of visits to the existing pub would generate more income than traffic to the proposed smaller pub. Nor could the Appellant explain why the pub was being marketed for £800,000 when his own Viability Report stated that the pub as it stands is only worth £300,000. At another point in the proceedings, the Appellant also stated that the intention was to spend £231,000 on works to the proposed residual pub, which would be sold for something in the region of £350,000. The Appellant had to admit that the asking price was not based on the commercial value of the pub, but on a need to recover the losses from what he admitted was a bad business decision in the first place.

Dale Ingram later told me that she had never seen so many members of the public attend a Public Hearing on a pub before (she has attended dozens of such hearings). I don't know exactly how many of you came (I stopped counting at 60!), but Dale and all of us at SCPL would like to extend our sincere thanks. Whilst we await the result of the hearing (this could be between 3 weeks and 3-4 months), we will continue to explore all avenues in our efforts to secure a viable future for The Kings Arms.

Damian Clay, SCPL Management Committee, 21st September 2017.

Stockland Community Pub Limited is a Registered Society under the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014 - No. 32191R

Registered Office: Shorms, Shore Bottom, Stockland, Honiton, Devon EX14 9DQ