

Public Meeting -to consider sale of the Bell

23rd September Memorial Hall 7.30

The meeting was attended by around 30 people including several residents from Church Street.

Gareth Epps outlined the situation concerning the Bell, saying that the Town Council had been informed of the intention of Greene King to sell the property and that as it has been registered as an Asset of Community Value a community group has the right to express the wish to put in a bid to buy the property. This is a right to bid but not to buy and Greene King can choose who they wish to sell it to. In order to get a six-month moratorium to put together a bid, the Town Council has to inform WODC by 27th September.

It is thought that it is not up for sale as a going concern. Currently there are 10 pubs in Oxfordshire where the ACV process has enabled community groups to buy. It was pointed out that in this case it is significantly a hotel and restaurant as well as a pub. Help and assistance is offered by an organisation known as the Plunkett Foundation and others and there may be some moderate funding available.

Questions were asked about the level of protection for change of use through the planning system and it was pointed out that it is a listed building in a conservation area, is protected under the local plan and neighbourhood plan and also that the land at the rear to the stream is a protected local green space which is very significant in the character of the town. These provide a high level of protection and may deter developers considering buying the property.

There were also questions on the cost of buying and renovating and although an exact figure is not known it is anticipated to be 2 -3 million pounds. There was a general feeling that it would be difficult to raise such a sum; there were those who felt there were people who might be able to raise that amount. It is considerably more than was required for other ACV buyouts. There was a general feeling that the Bell is a significant tourism asset in a prime location and that along with providing accommodation which is scarce in the area the restaurant would be popular and that with appropriate investment on renovation it would be a viable and welcome business. It was also noted that it would offer the only licensed function room.

If the town were to buy the property there are a number of ways in which it could be managed including letting to tenants or as a joint venture rather than just by the community. As far as is known there has been no marketing by Greene King and the level of interest is not known but some said that there were companies who had evaluated the business and were prepared to invest the amount required and to make a substantial offer to Greene King to run it as a going concern.

Questions were also asked as to the actual state of the building as it is not possible to get access at the moment. It is known that the ground floor is in a poor state with renovation work not being completed and that some rooms need considerable work on them. It was suggested that an Architectural Heritage Valuation should be carried out to assess this. It was also suggested that the Town Council could commission a feasibility study on the work that would be required to bring the building back into use.

Finally, questions were asked on the risks and disadvantages of implementing the moratorium as an ACV. There are no significant risks even if no bid to buy the property is in fact made. There would obviously be some delay but this was generally not felt to be significant. If someone came up with an acceptable offer to buy and run the business this could still take place after 6 months.

Gareth Epps told the meeting that if there was a desire to trigger the moratorium WODC required the application to do this by 27th September and that this would therefore be decided by the Town Council at the planning meeting on Monday 26th September. Anyone with an interest was encouraged to attend this meeting.

At this point it was resolved to take a vote of those present as to whether this should be requested by the Town Council.

The vote was

In favour 17

Against 3

Abstentions 4

Therefore, a clear majority in favour and this will be put to the Town Council at the planning meeting for a decision.

Tony Merry