



## Notes of a Special Meeting of the West Acre Parish Council held at 6pm on 16<sup>th</sup> August 2021 in the Village Hall

### Present

**Parish Councillors:** Eoghan Sheils (ES)(Chair), Ralph Sliwa (RS), Ernest Heatley (EH), Jeremy Cameron (JC), Lucy Birkbeck (LB) & Peter Wilson (PW)

**Others:** There were 7 others in attendance (including Alec Birkbeck).

**Welcome:** The Chair welcomed everyone, and explained that this was a “special” meeting called aimed primarily at discussing strategy to find a replacement clerk following Henry’s resignation earlier in the year. However, following deep concerns expressed to councillors by residents regarding the future of the Stag Pub this topic was added as a second item to the agenda given the depth of feelings in the village.

### **Item 1 – Future of The Stag**

ES explained that there had been some communications between councillors following the previous village meeting and JC had set out some suggestions aimed at establishing if an alternative to ending Paul and Serina’s tenancy was possible. ES invited JC therefore to open the discussion.

#### **JC set out the following points & ideas;**

- *Paul and Serina, who could not attend, have done an excellent job, serving good food in a traditional pub environment.*
- *An alternative solution could be a 3-year tenancy allowing the estate time to work with Paul and Serina to refurbish what they can of the pub, seek planning permission and set up the b & b. This would get over any concerns that both the current tenants and the estate will be without an income/pub with the pub closed for a period because all the necessary approvals and work to refurbish the pub would take some time.*
- *After 2 years the tenancy could be reviewed in the presence of solicitors and/or parish council*
- *Tenants are better than managers at running pubs – tenants make more money because of the profit incentive*
- *Let’s sit down, discuss & try to find a compromise – better for both the estate and current incumbents. A key desire is to avoid any further unpleasant meetings – let’s aim to get something positive out for the fantastic pub we have which is an important community asset.*
- *The community is very upset and it would be good for them to feel that have been listened to!*

#### **EH followed on with the following comments;**

- *A concern to ensure that proposals for b & B / pub & wider village development should be set within the Planning Policy for West Acre in which only very limited development is permitted*
- *Supporting the principle of retaining the character/nature of pub as small and intimate – we should be looking for a small-scale development*
- *Small scale tourism – and community facilities promoted (the proposed B & B could fit that context)*

- *Would not support large scale development*

RS indicated that whilst he understood and appreciated the views and concerns expressed by resident's he was having difficulty understanding why the parish council should take a stand point on the matter at this stage given that the outcome of any other negotiations between parties is not yet known

ES reminded all that whilst PC councillors have limited scope to control such matters one of our roles is to represent the community and we should democratically represent those who approach us – on all sides of the argument/discussion.

ES invited Alec Birkbeck (AB) to join the discussion by asking if there was any other way of completing the project of refurbishment with Serina of Paul continuing as tenants?

AB made the following points

- *The estate is at the beginning of the process of developing ideas and therefore the final the outcome is yet not set in stone – but ending the tenancy is the first necessary and difficult step.*
- *The 10 months ahead is a relatively long time which will allow the estate to find out what the wider village would like to see happen to the pub by canvassing and seeking opinions.*
- *There are many options that might be considered but ending the current tenancy was the only option available as there was no other way of proceeding legally.*

In further discussions AB indicated that a combination of the current tenancy overrun combined with a “rocky business relationship” with Paul & Serina meant that the notice to terminate the tenancy could not have been handled in any other way.

JC asked if it was still possible for the estate to negotiate a new tenancy with Paul & Serina to which Alec replied yes although he did not think it is the right way forward as the estate has the desire the run the pub itself with a manager. But the possibility might not be ruled out depending on the nature of the new business plan being developed.

AB went on to indicate a preliminary vision along the following lines;

- *the intention is that it should remain a primarily drinking pub with major alterations to the back of the building only*
- *Ford cottage would be part of the new project providing some accommodation with the advantage of providing a very attractive garden space*
- *The Vision therefore combines the current pub – but adding in a B & B element*
- *There could be a split in the B & B accommodation with some above the pub and some in Ford Cottage – food could be focused on the B & B side with more of a café provision?*
- *But the above a very early first thoughts*

Given discussions ES invited councillors to consider if they felt there is any value in making a representation to the estate outlining a process of inclusion/consultation which might go some way to defusing the various concerns expressed by villagers in relation to The Stag but also relevant to other developments potentially impacting residents

PW made the point that the Initiative re the pub was the estate's and when there is more flesh on the bones of the vision the PC's formal role may come into play through any planning application consultation processes. The PC must understand therefore that the estate is driving the process and councillors can only make recommendations and requests at this stage rather than directly control matters.

PW agreed that being involved in the process might help protect character etc. The PC could therefore seek to help and assist on the basis that the closer we are to the driving wheel the better, but asking for too many details at this stage now is the wrong way around.

The discussion concluded with Jeremy making a recommendation to draft a note for councillors' further consideration making recommendations to the estate as to involvement in the visioning process – suggesting a process for communication to include the view that any future village meetings called by the estate should be chaired independently and formally recorded.

This action was supported by PW and councillors approved it as an action

## **Item 2 – Finding a new Clerk.**

ES reminded the meeting that if we don't get a clerk we cannot continue as a PC

ES has now paid (following the meeting) an annual subscription to the Norfolk Association of Local Councils (NALC) – they may have names of possible clerks and help us through our precept scenarios

If we are to afford to pay a Clerk, we will need to increase our precept – compared to other parish councils our precept is very low and there seems to be scope therefore for us to increase the charge reasonably.

EH went on to outline an initial scenario to increase the precept based on a £3,000 per annum estimated salary but emphasized that the figures were provisional and subject to checking

- *A band C property is currently charged £168 of council tax per month (of which ~~£8.56~~ £0.86 is our current precept) and this would increase to £171 per month.*
- *Assuming we can use reserves for the first year of salary an increase of £2,23 per month would be needed in the second year increasing to £ 3.25 per month in the third year - stabilizing at that level assuming no other major new costs incurred.*

In effect this would be a small overall percentage increase, although a large percentage increase in the precept itself

ES indicated that he will follow up with NALC regarding the right type of clerk and right balance of time a clerk might require for our uniquely small PC and report back to councillors. It would be ideal if we find a clerk shared with another not-too-distant PC.

All councillors agreed to these initial steps with NALC and also supported the strategy in principle for how short-term 1<sup>st</sup> year funding the role through existing reserves but acknowledge that we may need to discuss any increase with residents via the newsletter in order to test the level of support.

PW confirmed that based on his experience NALC should be supportive and he offered to write a few paragraphs for the News letter outlining the stark choices (this note has since been circulated for consideration).

### **Post meeting note:**

*ES has made contact with NALC's admin and finance officer (Dan Howes) who has confirmed our membership and that he will send the relevant details to us accordingly (via my email address as a temporary measure). ES has now also spoken to Russell Reeve NALC's County Officer who has indicated that as a first next step we should aim to get our preferred job description to him and he could then arrange to place an advert and/or put us in with potential candidates. In terms of precept Russell thought that budgeting for 3 hrs per week @ £12 per hour would be a reasonable starting point. He advised that we look at similar job descriptions on their web site as a reference and draft one for ourselves accordingly.*

Next meeting is confirmed for 1<sup>h</sup> Nov depending on outcome of the search for a new clerk