

The Villagers Public House: Update December 2020

Following the mandate that was given in 2013 by a very large majority of the village, the Blackheath Village Society (BVS) has, through the Villagers Pub Committee, since then been spearheading efforts on behalf of the village to ensure that the Village Public House continues to operate as a public house for the benefit of the community. Much has happened since then. We set out below a brief history of events and details of the current position for the purposes of the AGM. As set out at the end of this report, after Christmas a consultation/survey will be circulated to all residents so that the current state of opinion in the village can be properly gauged.

Background

The pub was originally named “The Volunteer” after Queen Victoria reviewed her volunteer troops on Blackheath. The pub’s name was later changed to The Villagers. Until the early 2000s the pub thrived – known as ‘The Pub on the Heath’, and was a social hub for locals. However, it fell into decline in the later 2000s and closed down in 2010. The then freeholders (the Wellington Pub Group) clearly saw the value of the property as residential rather than as a pub and allowed it to fall into disrepair.

Timeline since 2013

2013: The Villagers Pub Committee was formed as a sub-committee of the BVS to try to save the pub and, following support from some 80% of households in the village, the property gained Asset of Community Value (ACV) status. The cause was also backed by the Parish Council and the Plunkett Foundation.

2015: The Pub was offered for sale at £575,000, clearly aimed at the residential market. The BVS made an offer to purchase at a price of £225,000 which was based on the professional valuation it had received for the property as a continuing public house. This offer was rejected by the Wellington Pub Group.

2016: At a village meeting in March 2016, there was overwhelming support for a proposal for a smaller pub and two cottages. Accordingly, the BVS applied for and received planning permission for this proposal. However in late 2016, the Pub was sold by the Wellington Pub Group to Lux Homes for £649,000.

2017: The ACV status of the pub lapsed but was renewed on the application of the BVS. Lux Homes then replicated BVS plans for a small pub and 2 cottages and received planning permission but with the specific condition that they fit out the third unit as a fully operational pub within 6 months of the first occupation of the cottages.

2020: Lux Homes completed the cottages and has sold one for £900,000. However, the remaining cottage and the pub remain unsold. In late October 2020, the Villagers Pub Committee made an offer on behalf of the residents of Blackheath to purchase the pub for £250,000 (including VAT), subject to contract. That offer has not been accepted. Lux Homes have indicated that they are looking for a figure circa. £500,000.

Recent renewal of the pub’s ACV status

The ACV status of the pub was due to lapse again this year and so the BVS applied to renew it for a second time. There were 87 signatories in support and the BVS was given Notice on 5 November 2020 that the application had been successful. Lux Homes has the opportunity to request a review of the decision within 8 weeks, and if this does not take place the pub will remain on the List of ACVs for a further 5 years unless it is sold in the meantime. When Lux Homes wish to sell the pub, they will be obliged to notify Waverley Borough Council (under Section 95 of the Act, as defined by the Localism Act 2011) and the community then has a period of 6 months within which to submit an offer to purchase before bids can be accepted from other bidders. This period of 6 months provides the community with time to raise the necessary funds for purchase.

Lux Homes' planning permission

The planning permission that Lux Homes has received specifically requires it to fit out the third unit on the site as an operational pub. However, Lux Homes has recently applied for a variation of that condition to relocate a toilet from the ground floor to the first floor which would make it easier for the unit to be marketed in due course as a residential unit. This has received 23 objections and one letter of support.

The view of the Villagers Pub Committee and the position of the BVS

While there is a chance of reinstating a pub for the village, the members of the Villagers Pub Committee believe it is right to continue down the path that the BVS has followed to date, to ensure that the planning condition to which Lux Homes is subject (i.e. to fit out the third unit as an operational pub) is adhered to and to actively work with interested investors to purchase the pub and/or to lease the completed unit. They believe that this is not just about buying a pub; it is about investing in the future of the community and ensuring that the community hub is run for the benefit of local residents and visitors.

Nevertheless, the BVS committee recognises that a lot has happened since the village as a whole was last consulted about the pub, that since then residents' views may have changed, and that there are some residents (including a number who live close to the pub) who now believe that it would be best to allow the pub to be sold as a third cottage. On the other hand, it also recognises that 87 signatories recently supported the application to extend the status of the Villagers Pub as an Asset of Community Value for another 5 years and that only one message of support (as opposed to 23 objections) was lodged in relation to Lux Homes' recent application to vary the planning condition imposed by Waverley Borough Council.

Consultation/survey in the New Year

Before taking any further steps, the BVS wishes to gauge the views of all residents about the way forward. The details of the consultation/survey process remain to be finalised, however a document will be circulated to all residents early in the New Year.