

Longparish Community Pub Limited

Chairman's Report for the Annual Members' Meeting on 18th October 2024

Chairman's Welcome

Welcome to our fifth Annual Members Meeting. The Plough has now been open for business for just over 3 years as a community owned pub! Running a pub, or any hospitality business in the current climate, is challenging. The last year has been particularly challenging for The Plough, especially on the financial front, but there's also a lot to be proud of and the foundations supporting our business are now stronger than ever.

Recently I attended an excellent training workshop at the Plunkett Foundation's offices near Oxford where it was made clear that the Management Committee is not only elected to represent your interests as the members of our Society, it also carries the accountability for operating the business, without which the pub could not legally operate.

So, I'd really like to say a huge thank you to our existing committee and the members who have put themselves forward this year to stand for election to the Management Committee. Without members coming forward to serve on the committee, there would simply be no pub.

My thanks also go to Graeme Francis for acting as Society Secretary, since we began 6 years ago. Graeme has advised he will be standing down from this role before the end of this year.

Chairman's Report

This time last year, the Plough was going through some challenging times. The pub was operating with a temporary relief manager, and we had only just started recruiting for a new permanent manager. We were fortunate last Autumn to appoint Rhomeo as a full time General Manager, who started just in time for the Christmas rush. But while the pub had continued operating since the previous manager's departure, there was a lot that needed fixing behind the scenes when Rhomeo joined.

For the Plough to operate as a financially sustainable business there is really only one thing that is needed to get right. Put simply, there must be enough turnover to cover our overheads. The pub's two biggest overheads are buying the products to sell and paying the staff employed to serve customers (whether that's out front, or behind the scenes in the kitchen). In comparison, all other costs, including the eye watering high energy bills, pale into insignificance. That's not to say they don't matter and cutting costs where-ever possible is clearly important, but the business will not succeed unless turnover and the margins made on products sold, plus the staff costs are all at the right levels.

When Rhomeo joined us, turnover was not great, although also not too bad, but profit margins had fallen well below target and staff costs were spiralling out of control. We discovered our temporary relief managers had unfortunately not been able to drive a sustainable business. The impact of this difficult period is reflected in last year's annual accounts.

I'm pleased to say that this period is now well behind us. Margins are not just healthy, but would be the envy of many other pub businesses. Billy as head chef is laser focussed on buying smartly, cooking cleverly and squeezing every last bit of value from the ingredients he buys. Very little waste comes out of the kitchen. Behind the bar, new supply agreements, have also helped to increase margins, while maintaining fair prices for customers. Rhomeo quickly brought the runaway staff costs back under control. Which just leaves turnover. That challenge is a harder one to fix and is still work in progress. The main limitation until recently has been finding a second full-time chef to allow the pub to extend opening hours and to expand the range of exciting offerings coming from the kitchen. I'm pleased to be able to report that Chef Tom has joined us recently, and hopefully anyone who has dined at the Plough recently will have experienced the positive impact that having this extra help in the kitchen is making.

A couple of months ago Rhomeo decided he wanted to pursue his interests elsewhere, and we said goodbye at the end of September. Chelsea started as our new General Manager just last week and has quickly picked up the reins. Chelsea is an experienced manager, is local

and has worked for a number of pubs in the Bourne Valley. She brings renewed energy to managing the Plough, and has started with a decent run-up into what should be a lucrative festive period.

The foundations are now pretty much all in place for the business to really take off. The Plough's reputation to date has largely grown through word of mouth, and today it is very much a destination pub of choice with customers coming from far and wide. In the last couple of weeks, The Plough has picked up accolades from TripAdvisor with their Traveller's Choice Award for the second year running. This award is given to businesses in the top 10% worldwide. In fact, the reviews suggest The Plough is in the top 1%, which is an amazing accolade for our staff. The Plough has also picked up a Good Food award, again for the 2nd year running, and just yesterday was awarded 'Diners Choice' by Open Table. I think we all owe a huge thank you to all the dedicated staff for their hard work, extra hours, and commitment they've put in to making the pub business a success.

Chelsea's focus will be on increasing turnover by giving the community great reasons to visit the pub. Hopefully, she will find a way for the Plough to extend its opening times, and drive much needed improvement to the Plough's Social Media engagement.

Of course, our mission is for the Plough to be much "more than a pub". Community is at the heart of our Society, and the community hub is an integral part. True success means establishing not only a successful commercial business, but also fulfilling the promises of creating a true community hub. The end outbuilding has sat idle for too long since it was refurbished last year. While its long-term use may still be open to debate, in the immediate term we plan to bring in a pool table, and if there's room also a dart board and table football with the aim of bringing community groups together, maybe even form some pub teams. But first it will need decorating, so please keep a look out for a call for volunteers to help make this happen.

Talking of volunteering, during the renovation, over 140 people contributed by volunteering their valuable time and skills. We still rely on volunteers for all sorts of tasks behind the scenes, from helping in the garden, keeping things tidy and with routine maintenance. Volunteering to join the Plough team in a variety of support roles is a rewarding and fulfilling experience. You'll build new friendships, learn new skills and contribute to the community. I hope that one of the first tasks for the committee this next year will be to focus on re-engaging with our local members and to encourage opportunities to help behind the scenes through volunteering.

At the start of this year your committee spent much of its time fire-fighting and dealing with day to day problems. However, normality has started to return, which has allowed the Management Committee to focus on improving governance, reviewing and improving the various policies needed to run a maturing business, and ensuring the legal obligations for the business are maintained at the highest standard.

LCPL was incorporated as a Community Benefit Society (CBS), and one of the key pillars of being a CBS, is that its mission must be for the benefit of the wider community and not just for its members. We clearly meet this requirement in that the Plough is open for everyone to enjoy. We also strive to help other communities seeking to follow in our footsteps. During the last year the Plunkett Foundation and CAMRA (Campaign for Real Ale) have referred other community groups hoping to save their pub and learn from our success. We have met with and presented to a number of these groups. Sadly, the statistics they face aren't great. With only around 1 in 15 groups managing to reopen their pub. However, there are now 175 other community owned pubs across the UK. Please try to seek them out and give them your support ~~them~~ when you are travelling in the UK.

Interest payments on investments:

We will not be making any interest payments on investments for the last financial year. Shares need to be held for a minimum of three years and no interest is payable during those first three years. After that, interest is payable at the discretion of the Management Committee and will be reviewed each year.

Membership and Membership Strategy:

At the end of last year, we opened a new open-ended community-shares offer to welcome additional members. This open share offer means that new villagers and visitors can always join us to support The Plough. The Society now has 315 members, who have invested a total of £467,080. I mentioned in my introduction that having a strong and functioning Management Committee is an essential part of being able to run the business. We will only be able to maintain the long-term continuation of the Plough by regularly bringing in new members to the Society. Recruiting new members is essential for the long-term success of the Plough, so if you have new neighbours, or friends in the area, please encourage them to join.

Summary & Thank You:

Thank you to all our volunteers who have contributed their time and energy over the last year working in the pub or gardens, carrying out repairs, or diving in at short notice when the kitchen needed urgent help with the washing up. It's a huge help.

Thank you to my fellow committee members, who have served at any time over the last year, for their time, commitment and support. And a special thank you to Ailsa Wiggans who is standing down today. Without her advice and considerable time, managing HR would have been a minefield. I'd also like to thank Diane Newell who very kindly agreed to be co-opted onto the committee during this year, bringing her depth of experience in Compliance related matters, and for putting in many of the foundations I referred to earlier.

Plus again, a huge thank you to all of our staff, both past and present, for their commitment and hard work through last year.

Thank you also to our Parish Council for their continued support.

Your Committee remain confident that the Plough can run as a profitable and sustainable business. Our focus heading into the next year will be to continue to support our General Manager to build on the things that are going well, and continue to improve wherever we can.

I'm often asked by members how can we best help? As always, you can help most by supporting your pub both as a customer and volunteer. Please use The Plough, bring your friends, and please tell everyone you know about our fantastic story and enjoy everything it has to offer.

To conclude, we have all built a fantastic community asset in the Plough, a warm and welcoming pub and social hub, a vital addition to both our community and the surrounding area. We can be well proud of this achievement and together, we must continue to build the business so that it serves its purpose for future generations.