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Dear Mr Grogan

South Norfolk Council's Rural Pubs Scrutiny Task Group

Members of South Norfolk Council felt that anecdotally, the difficulties facing public houses in the area were a cause for concern. It was agreed that a Scrutiny Task Group should be set up to examine the factors leading to the success or otherwise of pubs and consider what advice or assistance, if any, this Council could offer licensees in the district.

The Council's campaign to assist public houses in the district has received a great deal of attention in the media. The press release was picked up by the local media who ran it as a front-page story. The two main national publications for licensees, the Publican and the Morning Advertiser, were contacted and both ran the story on the front page of their website and also as a story in their printed magazines.

The Task Group felt it was important that their consideration was based on evidence rather than supposition and so a questionnaire was sent out to all the publicans in the district, which asked a number of key questions. There was an excellent response rate, with more than half of all questionnaires being returned and one publican commenting, "I applaud the council for tackling what will soon be a much worse problem for many rural pubs."

A morning conference and buffet lunch was organised in late September 2008, which was an opportunity for all publicans in the area to network with each other and participate in one of the two workshops. The Group also spoke to a number of witnesses, including representatives from a local brewery, from a specialised estate agency and Enterprise Inns.

Arising from all the research, external witnesses and the publicans themselves were a huge number of ideas and suggestions. The group also felt some ideas were not practical, for example:

"Lobby govt so pubs can become a smoking or a non smoking pub, or bring back smoking rooms – an opportunity to choose to be smoking/non smoking would have been appropriate."

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The Group agreed that encouraging smoking was against many other agendas of the Council and also would have little realistic chance of success.

The ideas and suggestions were then grouped into two areas; one area which this Council could tackle itself, for example assistance with promotion, signposting to grants etc and also those which required the intervention of central government. The Task Group felt that this letter should be sent to you, as Chairman of the All Parliamentary Beer Group as the stated purpose of the group seemed to fit very well with the aims of the Task Group here.

The main concerns of the publicans that the Task Group felt should be lobbied on were:

- ❑ For breweries and pubcos to be forced to relax beer ties and allow publicans to buy some of their own stock. Stock is frequently sold at inflated prices and can account for a significant part of the company's profit, however this severely limits the publicans' ability to be competitive.
- ❑ Business rates – at present local government can grant discretionary rate relief only when a pub fits a very prescribed set of circumstances, for example where they are the only pub in the village and have a rateable value of less than £10,500. This Council believes local government is in the best position to decide when and to whom discretionary rate relief should be granted and should have complete freedom to do so.
- ❑ Social clubs - publicans also requested that there should be a level playing field with business rates for social clubs. The position at present is that if a social club occupies premises in its own right, then the property will be business rated in the same way as a pub. However, if the social club is contained within a village hall, they are not rated separately and this was seen as promoting unfair competition.
- ❑ Beer duty was seen as having a significant impact on costs and profits and this Council is requesting a reduction or freeze on beer duty until there is an upturn in the economic climate.
- ❑ Ask for the imposition of a minimum price for per unit of alcohol, which would effectively stop the off trade loss-leading on drink. Many publicans felt they were unfairly penalised and blamed by their local communities for drunken behaviour when in fact they believed cheap alcohol at the supermarket was to blame.
- ❑ Allow pubs to recycle glass via bottle banks. At present, because all bottles from pubs are classed as trade waste, although many pubs have bottle banks in the car parks, they are not allowed to use them. Their glass has to be collected as trade waste and in most cases, sent to landfill, which does seem absurd. It not only increases costs to the pubs, as they have to pay for bottles to be collected, it also harms the environment, as glass can of course be recycled.

I hope you are in agreement with these proposals and feel able to take these forward. I look forward to receiving your thoughts.

Kind regards.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K Weeks', written in a cursive style.

Cllr Keith Weeks
Chairman of the Rural Pubs Scrutiny Task Group

cc: Richard Bacon MP
Charles Clarke MP