

Lulu Bowerman
The Emsworth Food Festival
C/O The Brookfield Hotel
93 Havant Road
Emsworth
Hampshire
PO10 7LF

01/09/08

Dear Ms Bowerman and members of the EFF Board,

We are writing as concerned residents of Emsworth regarding the latest decision to cancel the Emsworth Food Festival. Along with many other members of the community, we agree that there seems to be some issues arising from the way in which this decision was taken.

First and foremost, it appears that the Emsworth Food Festival's usual attitude of transparency and openness, as outlined in the constitution, has been abandoned in the last 10 months or so. The minutes from key meetings regarding the cancellation of the 2008 Festival and subsequent meetings leading to the decision to cancel the Festival altogether have failed to appear on the Food Festival website. We are curious as to the reasoning behind this lack of transparency all of a sudden? You have a responsibility to provide full details of these minutes and we, as well as other local residents will be keen to read them.

We are interested to know how the decision to cancel the Emsworth Food Festival was taken and how the voting procedures outlined in the constitution were carried out? How many members of the Committee were present when this decision was made? Were there sufficient representatives of the various businesses and stakeholders in Emsworth present in order to make this decision democratic and representative of the whole community?

We are also curious, as are many residents, as to how and why this decision to cancel the Food Festival was taken? Surely the Food Festival has reached and was consistently achieving its original aims of:

- Encouraging locals and people living on the periphery to shop in Emsworth
- Encouraging tourists and day visitors to visit Emsworth
- Establishing Emsworth as a 'unique place to eat, visit and live'
- Encouraging local businesses to do business with each other rather than business elsewhere
- Establishing an aesthetic cultural event that improves the living environment for the residents of Emsworth.

If these original aims and objectives were being fulfilled year on year, where was the reasoning behind changing the whole concept into something completely different? When the system was working well, when good relationships had been built up over eight years and when the reputation of the event was spreading throughout the UK and attracting visitors from all over the country, did yourself and the Board decide that it was time to call it a day? We, along with many others, are struggling to try and understand your logic behind the decision to cancel the Festival. If you weren't willing to carry on organising the Festival, I am sure plenty of people will have come forward to offer their services.

The article below that appeared in the local paper raises some important questions on the reliability of the reasoning behind cancelling the Food Festival. Appendix one clearly shows the support of local residents and businesses, with the Festival in 2007 being “the best yet” and with businesses doing “fantastically” and having their “best ever trading festival”. Online survey comments quoted in this document show that 82% of residents voted the festival “thoroughly enjoyable”. It seems therefore that the justifications used in this newspaper article have been overly exaggerated and do not reflect the real views of Emsworth residents and businesses.

This is what appeared in the The Portsmouth News: 12 August 2008

*“THE Emsworth Food Festival has been scrapped. Community leaders have decided to ditch the **controversial (WHEN DID THIS BECOME CONTROVERSIAL?)** three-day festival and will be putting on four smaller events spread throughout the year.*

The events will be called ‘festival markets’ and will have up to 40 stalls selling goods in South Street car park.

The food festival was cancelled this year after complaints that it had become a victim of its own success with more than 50,000 visitors descending on Emsworth and effectively closing the village centre for three days. (CAN YOU VERIFY THESE COMPLAINTS AND PROVIDE EVIDENCE? – EVEN IF THERE WERE MINIMAL CONCERNS FROM LOCAL RESIDENTS, WE DON’T FEEL THAT A FEW COMPLAINS JUSTIFY CANCELLING THE FESTIVAL THAT WAS SUPPORTED BY THOUSANDS).

But it still remained uncertain whether the festival would make a return next year.

However, following a crunch meeting between Emsworth Business Association and the Food Festival Committee, it has been decided to scrap the idea of having a large food festival once a year.

Brendan Gibb-Gray, chairman of Emsworth Business Association, said: ‘I think it is a very exciting idea.

‘We have looked at Winchester, Chichester and Petersfield and we feel this is an opportunity to take the best of the Emsworth Food Festival and get as many local businesses involved as possible.

‘We are trying to make it a more contained event and hopefully minimise disruption to the rest of the town.’ (NEARLY ALL LOCAL BUSINESSES WERE ALREADY INVOLVED WITH EFF. WHY CHANGE THIS? IF IT WAS ADAMANTLY FELT THAT OTHER NON-FOOD BUSINESSES WERE MISSING OUT, THEN WHY NOT JUST ADD THEIR BUSINESSES IN THE EFF FORMAT BY INCLUDING THEM AND NOT RESTRICTING THE EFF TO PURELY FOOD STALLS?)

The markets will incorporate businesses in Emsworth after complaints that the festival was not benefiting local traders. (THE COMMENTS SEEN IN APPENDIX ONE CLEARLY SHOW THAT THE BENEFIT TO LOCAL BUSINESSES WAS VERY PROFOUND – CAN YOU PROVIDE EVIDENCE OF THESE COMPLAINTS?)

All businesses in Emsworth will now be given the opportunity to set up a stall.

The main theme will still be food, but other goods will be on sale, including gifts, books and crafts.

Organisers say the event will still have a ‘festival theme’ as there will still be street entertainment and cookery demonstrations.

The first festival market will take place on Sunday December 14 and will have a Christmas theme.

Mr Gibb-Gray said: ‘There are lots of economic reasons that say the food festival would be a difficult financial proposition at the moment. (CAN YOU EXPLAIN FURTHER AND IN MORE DETAIL?)

‘It would be difficult at the moment to make it financially viable.’ (WHY? – NOT EVERYTHING CAN BE BLAMED ON THE “CREDIT CRUNCH”. THIS WAS NOT YOUR ORIGINAL REASONING SO WHY START SUGGESTING THIS NOW?)

But he added: 'It's not goodbye to the food festival. It's bello it's back, but it is in a different format. Nevertheless it will be the best of the Emsworth Food Festival.'

In the Emsworth Food Festival Constitution it states that:

"Members of the Committee shall be open, irrespective of political party, nationality, religious opinion, race, gender or colour".

The Emsworth Business Association (EBA) seems to have some influence over the EFF Committee and Board and have voiced their opinions, which no doubt have affected certain decisions that have been made regarding the Emsworth Food Festival. Yet the Chairman of the EBA is Mr Brendan Gibb-Gray. He is also the local Conservative Councillor, THIS shows his inherent political interest, which will therefore have an affect any decision he makes, regarding the Emsworth Food Festival. Impartiality and the issue of conflict of interest are clearly apparent and worrying to us and many other residents. As an elected Councillor, he is accountable to local residents, and is responsible for acting on our behalf and representing the interests of his constituents. Who were arguably predominantly in favour of the Emsworth Food Festival. This should be his priority. Acting on local interest groups questions this priority as well as his accountability. His ability to make impartial decisions for these interest groups is significantly affected and should be questioned.

Furthermore, it appears that there are some issues surrounding the Emsworth Food Festival accounts and the recent movement of some funds. Again, as outlined in the constitution, the financial accounts are to be "independently examined". Many of the residents of Emsworth would be keen to view these "independently examined" accounts and get some answers as to where this money has been moved and why. If the Emsworth Food Festival is to be cancelled, what will happen with these Emsworth Food Festival Funds? As stated in the constitution: *"All Monies raised on or on behalf of the Emsworth Food Festival shall be applied to further the objectives of the Emsworth Food Festival"*. If the Food Festival is now cancelled, then the use of this money needs to be subject to a strict review and significant discussion, which includes *all* members of the committee and should be advertised and open to local residents. It would be assumed, in line with the ethos of transparency, that the minutes from these discussions would appear on the Food Festival website also.

Finally, the issue of a "Thought for Food" is causing much upset from the local community. This event, being organised by many members of the Food Festival founders and organisers, is using the concept of Emsworth Food Festival to create this new event at Stansted. You have decided not to hold the event in Emsworth for various reasons, yet are happy to organise a similar event at Stansted and label it "A *new* food festival".

The issue of the EFF Gazebos needs questioning here too. EFF purchased several gazebos for use at the EFF and were stored at a secure location in Maisemore Gardens in Emsworth. Yet, several months ago, Ms Bowerman was seen to have moved these gazebos with the reasoning that they were "going to a more secure location". No further details were given, yet all the gazebos were moved and their whereabouts are now unknown. This move was not sanctioned by the EFF committee, why was this? On top of this, Ms Bowerman sat in on the meeting between the EFF Committee and Thought for Food (TFF) organisers when it was arranged that FFT would pay to loan the EFF gazebos at a price of £45 each for three days. During this discussion, Ms Bowerman should have left the meeting as acting as Chairman of the EFF and one of the directors of FFT would have brought more issues of conflict of interest.

Carol Common is a director and committee member of the CIC (Community Interest Company) and EFF and was responsible for booking all the stalls for the EFF; details of which were contained on a database. It appears that Carol Common is now responsible for making the bookings for the Thought for Food event (as appears on their website). It may be assumed here that the EFF database has been used to bring business to A Thought for Food. We don't believe that this is very fair.

The Emsworth Food Festival benefited the local community and local businesses immensely. This is one of the fundamental aims stated in the constitution. These objectives are supposed to guide your behaviour and decision-making. Yet yourself and the other individuals involved namely, Alistair Gibson, and Rebecca Gibson who have been directly involved in the EFF and Thought for Food, set up your own private company in February 2008, for the reason of organising a profit making food festival named "A Thought for Food" at Stansted in September 2008. This Festival does not involve local Emsworth businesses, and many local Emsworth businesses may now lose out this weekend because of this new event. If the Emsworth Food Festival had "run its course", why was there such a determination to set up another company to organise a "new food festival"? This incidentally is charging expensive entrance fees and will be making a profit, unlike Emsworth Food Festival, where any money raised went back into community projects. We must point out that these expensive entrance fees will limit the accessibility of the event to many people within Emsworth and the surrounding area. Emsworth Food Festival was free and accessible to all people in the community who wanted to attend. The new festival at Stansted will rule out this community involvement and severely restrict some resident's ability to attend this event.

Some might say that some members of the Board and Committee of the Emsworth Food Festival have lost their commitment to the village of Emsworth and are more interested in profit margins than local business and community projects that benefit local residents.

Furthermore, any attempts by local residents and businesses to re-introduce mini festivals celebrating local food and business within Emsworth over the next few months to try and regain the spirit of the Food Festival that we have now lost, have been hampered by Havant County Council and certain people within this institution. We find this very disappointing and cannot understand the reasoning behind these decisions either.

We hope that you take note of these points and understand that the residents of Emsworth are merely trying to understand what has happened to our beloved Food Festival. We are all upset that it has been cancelled. The Festival was a highlight of the year for many people and really showed the community spirit and brought the village together. Emsworth has a tradition of village festivals, dating back many years and it seems such a shame that we are going to be losing out on something that is so special and the envy of many nearby towns.

Please note that a copy of this letter has also been passed on to the Portsmouth News and Chichester Observer as well as other local press. David Willets MP, has also been sent a copy.

We look forward to hearing your public response.

Yours Sincerely,

The Undersigned