

Kenneth Wright, Managing Director Phoenix Artist Club, London

7th May 2019

'Best live entertainment pub' in the 2018 Great British Pub Awards and Federation of Small Businesses London Community Business of the Year 2019.

I read with interest today's Morning Advertiser regarding final submissions of evidence to you for the above by 10th inst.

I'm the owner and MD of one of the last wholly independent venues operating in central London.

I inherited the Phoenix Arts Club (www.phoenixartistclub.com) some nine years ago. To be frank, it was a rundown mess, with major debt and worn out fixtures and fittings. It was also at the heart of crossrail chaos in Charing Cross Road/Tottenham Court Road (and there's still chaos here because of that white elephant).

It's been years of sheer bloody hard work and innovation to turn the venue from a disaster into a multi-award winning, much loved local community hub - in an area of the city where ignorant politicians both local and national seem to think no community exists.

We now employ twenty staff, including two apprentices, host over eight hundred live community shows a year, assist the neighbourhood to look after the last remaining green space locally - Phoenix Gardens - support two local churches, took over the only business community networking group and magazine InCovent Garden - aimed at supporting SMEs and start ups in WC2. We are one of the only LGBTQ friendly venues in Camden - all the others have closed.

We offer free, broadcast quality fibre optic WiFi to customers through our free daytime business hub. Fast network speeds being critical for those in the creative industry that we host.

We are home to The Federation of Small Businesses in Central London, Founder members of The Music Venue Trust, Institute of Travel and Tourism and Safer West End. We are also listed as Trading for Good, Musicians union fair pay, Equity Fair pay, Access is Attitude and Camden Climate Change Alliance organisation.

That's just scrapping the surface of what we as a proactive, independent 18 hour a day seven day a week company have to do to stay ahead in a location where no new licenses will be issued.

I've watched as well run, small pubs are swallowed up by large brewers or unscrupulous private landlords, forcing out good managers and good customers alike in a grab for tourist income and to hell with the community.

We are desperate to expand as we need to dilute our overheads with more than one venue. But we haven't a hope in hell. We are priced out or - despite our numerous awards - not taken seriously.

Our turnover has gone from a debt of £80k when I took over to £1.2million this past year.

We invest heavily in our staff, building and product, so with such a turnover we realised a profit of £6k last year. That seems ridiculously small - but I quote from NatWest's specialist hospitality division that looks after us - 'These are a good set of figures with turnover, gross margin and operating profit all up so I can imagine that you are pleased with them.'

Our business rates are crippling, we don't own the building - but thank heavens our landlord is himself a small independent and supports us extremely well. We are a free house, but chose Marstons to supply product. They have been instrumental in assisting us both financially and through technical support to stay ahead of the game.

I counted that there are 57 separate pieces of legislation, obligation, taxes and levy placed upon my business in Camden. That's not counting the licence itself, which is the size of a small book. We are policed to within an inch of our life on noise, waste, public nuisance, occupancy levels, minority access, health, hygiene and a seemingly never-ending list of objectives or flavour of the month initiatives pushed on us by well meaning clip board carriers with no budget or resources to do their job themselves - but happy to pass the buck on to me. From mental health to recycling, clean air objectives to allergy awareness, it's impossible to keep up.

On top of all of this, we now have a self-appointed industry of alcohol naysayers who cling on to any outdated statistic to forward their killjoy cause. Accident and Emergency admissions caused by alcohol abuse have fallen in London. Criminal acts caused or encouraged by alcohol abuse have fallen. The cost to the NHS of treatment for alcohol abuse has fallen. But still we are legislated and taxed to the highest level in Europe with no thought or consideration of the benefit a well run community led pub can bring to the neighbourhood.

We are hanging on by the skin of our teeth and unless those in charge pay better attention to the Night Time Economy and treat us as an asset rather than the enemy London, Manchester, Leeds et al will fail to attract tourists, students and the creative arts. Because we will all be shut or 'gentrified' into a chain.

I'm sorry if this has gone on a bit, but I am passionate about this, have hosted briefing sessions on site for Sir Kier Starmer, the Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, the leaders of both Westminster and Camden Council, The Night Czar and given evidence to a cross party committee at the HOL.

But nothing changes. The tsunami tidal wave has swept out, taking the poorly run and struggling venues with it. It's about to return and engulf what's left unless we get a grip.