

Chalford Parish Council Response to Old Neighbourhood Inn change of use from pub to private house application - S.24/0485/FUL

Chalford Parish Council strongly objects to the proposals to change the use of the Old Neighbourhood Inn (ONI) from a pub to a private dwelling. This document sets out the reasons for our objection, which were discussed and agreed at a public meeting of the Parish Council's Plans Assessment Committee held on 4 April 2024.

Background

Chalford is a large parish with a population of c.6,000, which is more than other Stroud District parishes of Minchinhampton, Nailsworth, Rodborough and Wotton-under-Edge. However, despite its size and very strong community spirit, it has a relatively limited, and diminishing, range of social and commercial services. As a result, it is at risk of becoming a dormitory settlement rather than a viable community in its own right. This is of great concern to the Parish Council and its residents.

All of the parish is within the Cotswold National Landscape and a large proportion within designated conservation areas.

Planning policy at all levels of government focusses on creating and maintaining sustainable and inclusive communities (highlighting the social objectives of health, social, leisure, recreational and cultural wellbeing); as well as environmental objectives, including provision of services locally, reducing car dependency and encouraging active travel.

The closure of the ONI in September 2022 came about due to the combined impact of exceptional circumstances arising from the Covid pandemic, extraordinary rise in energy costs, and the former tenants' personal circumstances. The freeholder's decision to sell, and the subsequent loss of the pub, have been sorely felt by Chalford residents.

Following the ONI's closure, the Parish Council nominated its registration as an Asset of Community Value (ACV), and this was approved by SDC in March 2023. In summary, the basis of that allocation was that the ONI was the main and only pub servicing the majority of Chalford Hill, and was very popular and well used within the community. A business plan was submitted with the nomination showing it was realistic to assume that the pub could continue to provide a valuable role in the social and economic well-being of the Parish within the next five years.

Following the confirmation of the ACV, members of the local community set up a committee of competent volunteers. They have been assessing potential future uses, business structures, and community funding potential, and have formulated a Community Business Society (CBS) – the Chalford Hill Community Pub Limited.

Unfortunately, the CBS was not able to fully complete its assessment within the ACV moratorium timescales for a community right to bid. A speculative indicative offer was made on the final day of the ACV moratorium. However, this was rejected by the current owner, who purchased the pub in February 2023, just before it was due to be auctioned.

The Parish Council has continued to support the community group in their efforts to acquire and run the property as a community hub and pub to encourage community and economic recovery and resilience.

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The current owner's actions since purchasing the pub have included: selling off part of the car park (where excavation was commenced despite the land contamination); failing to undertake even basic maintenance, causing the condition of the property to deteriorate materially following two winters unoccupied and without heating; seeking unrealistic offers to sell the property (which exceed market value); and an unwillingness to fully engage or negotiate with, or consider a realistic bid from, the CBS.

The combined impact of these actions is the cost of bringing the ONI back into use is increasing, diminishing the potential for it to be seen as a realistic prospect for a tenant landlord. This could suggest that there was never a genuine intention by the owner to retain the property in a community use. Rather, it would appear that there was a speculative strategy in mind based on breaking up the site, and creating a situation where the owner can argue that a continued pub or community use is not viable, to enable redevelopment for an alternative use and planning gain.

The ONI is one of a few remaining community assets in our parish, with many others lost in recent years. Most recently, the Chalford Hill Methodist Church was sold for use as a private residence (despite also being listed as an ACV). Additionally, the Red Lion Pub in Chalford has not traded since lockdown, with planning enforcement in progress but repeated promises from the owner to re-open not being fulfilled.

The number of pubs in the parish has fallen from double figures to only two, located at opposite ends of the parish boundary. Crucially, the Old Neighbourhood is situated at the centre of the parish.

The strength of community opinion is strongly demonstrated by the response to the current planning application directly and across all sections of the media and to county, district and parish councillors. The community is unanimous in objecting to the application and concern at the loss of another community asset; there is no local support at all for the application.

The significant number of responses on the SDC planning website clearly articulate the many valid objections of local residents to the change of use, and highlight the strength of opinion in support of the retention and evolution of the property to a community hub and pub.

Assessment of Policy E16

The Stroud District Local Plan contains the specific Policy E16 to "*guard against the unnecessary loss of valued facilities and services, particularly where this would reduce the community's ability to meet its day-to-day needs*" relating to protecting, inter alia, individual public houses, stating that development involving their loss will only be supported where **all** of their criteria are met.

We have reviewed the criteria of Policy E16 below and explain why we believe that none of the criteria are met:

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Criterion 1: “There is no prospect of current use continuing (which is evidenced)”

We believe that criterion 1 of Policy EI6 has not been met for the following reasons:

The ONI operated commercially for 150 years before the individual circumstances of the last tenant and the highly exceptional environment caused by the pandemic and then extraordinary energy cost increases (there was no cap on business energy costs) led to its cessation of trading in September 2022.

We believe that the Business Plan and Proposal prepared by Chalford Hill Community Pub Limited CBS, established by local residents with the support of the Plunkett Foundation and with the professional support of a licensed premises specialist, will provide clear and credible evidence that the current use can continue, and indeed broaden, and thrive for the benefit of the community. Their Plan will be published imminently.

We do not believe the material that has been submitted with the current change of use application provides sufficient evidence to demonstrate that there is “no prospect” of a continued uses as a pub. Furthermore there is no assessment of whether a change of use of part of the site or a broadening of the use to include other facilities alongside a pub might enable a continued community use (as set out in the supporting text to Policy EI6).

Criterion 2: “There are adequate similar use facilities, either within that settlement or adjoining countryside which cater for the needs of the local population and is accessible by walking or cycling – a distance of 800m”

We believe that criterion 2 of Policy EI6 has not been met for the following reasons:

The Planning Statement submitted with the change of use application (which incorrectly states that the location of the pub is on Mills Lane) lists several locations which it describes as alternatives to the ONI. The distances indicated (in miles) would appear to be “as the crow flies” rather than by foot or bike. In reality, the only directly comparable premises are the Kings Head, which is 1,126m away and the Ram which is 1,608m away. It is important to note that these pubs are at opposite edges of the parish, whereas the Old Neighbourhood is at the centre.

It is also very important also to consider the topography of Chalford Parish, and to be aware that there are few pavements, no cycle routes and limited street lighting in the vicinity of the alternative pub facilities. Additionally, no public transport services pass near to those pubs, and the buses that serve the wider parish are now infrequent.

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Boho on the Hill is identified by the applicant as being within 800m. However, this is not an alternative pub facility – it is a café with limited covers and limited opening hours. Chalford Sports and Social Club is also not an alternative facility – it is, as its name suggests, focussed on sports activity, has a limited license and in any event is over 800m away, again towards the edge of the parish.

Criterion 3: “The current or previous use is no longer viable, demonstrated by audited financial and marketing evidence over an agreed reasonable period”

We believe that criterion 3 of Policy EI6 has not been met for the following reasons:

There is no audited financial evidence of past performance of the ONI available. As previously stated, the reasons for cessation of the previous business were specific to the tenant and the exceptional circumstances at that time.

The viability report prepared by Bruton Knowles (which inexplicably describes the location of the application site as being directly opposite Ackerman Street park) presents a single viability analysis, at one point in time, based on a static and out of date model of what activity a pub can do to generate income and manage costs. The offering and function of pubs has evolved and should continue to evolve to be relevant.

We believe that the viability analysis undertaken by Chalford Hill Community Pub Limited CBS is far more credible – it is detailed, thoughtful, analytical, entrepreneurial, and community benefit focussed, and projects across several years. We understand it demonstrates long term and sustainable economic viability and solvency.

With regard to marketing of the ONI premises for sale, the property was put to market in March 2023, barely six months after acquisition. The agent’s report notes that the local community group have engaged both directly and indirectly and these negotiations continue; albeit we understand there is a lack of meaningful engagement from the vendor. We appreciate the vendor may be frustrated that the establishment of the CBS, and the preparation of its business plan and funding strategy has taken time. However, this is inevitable given the challenges to volunteer members of the community. The Plan is now in place and highly credible.

In conclusion, our view is that none of the criteria in SDC’s Policy EI6 are met, let alone all.

Summary

In summary, the permanent loss of the ONI as a community asset is very strongly opposed by the community; is contrary to government policies at all levels to sustain and encourage community facilities for social inclusion and cohesion, economic,

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leisure, and cultural benefits; and fails entirely to meet the requirements of SDC's Policy EI6.

There is a highly credible proposal from Chalford Hill Community Pub Limited CBS to acquire and run the establishment as a hub and pub with much increased community benefit.

The Parish Council therefore strongly objects to this application.