

# Comments for Planning Application 21/00345/FUL

## Application Summary

Application Number: 21/00345/FUL

Address: Wheatsheaf Yard, The Wheatsheaf High Street Oxford OX1 4DF

Proposal: Conversion of first and second floors to create 9no. student rooms, shared kitchen and common area. Formation of 2no. front dormers in association with a loft conversion. Removal of 1no. window to front elevation. Alteration to 1no. window and 1no. door to front elevation. Insertion of 1no. door to front elevation. Provision of bin and cycle stores

Case Officer: Tobias Fett

## Customer Details

Name: Mr Paul Wightman

Address: Farmoor Farm House, Oakes Lane, Farmoor, Oxford OX2 9PB

## Comment Details

Commenter Type: Members of the Public

Stance: Customer objects to the Planning Application

Comment Reasons:

- Effect on character of area
- Effect on existing community facilities
- General dislike or support for proposal
- Information missing from plans
- Not enough info given on application
- Other - give details

Comment: I object to the planning application on the following basis:

Heritage:

Under the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF,) the Government states that "the historic environment and its heritage assets should be conserved and enjoyed for the quality of life they bring to this and future generations."

Furthermore, under NPPF (paragraphs 189 & 190) the Planning Authority has a responsibility to understand the significance of the loss of the venue, which, would be catastrophic to the cultural life of this city and the surrounding area.

The live music venue on the first floor of the Wheatsheaf is a unique, authentic and distinctive cultural heritage asset, with both significant historical relevance, and the active potential to improve the quality of life for future generations of music lovers. So much so, that I'm surprised it has not yet been registered as being of designated community importance.

The same cannot be said of the proposal to turn the space into flats, for the use of a handful of students, who would no doubt, be blissfully unaware of the music greats who once played in what is now their kitchen (including one of Oxford's global cultural exports, Foals, who played their first ever gig there.) Perhaps they might be music students. I wonder what they would think, if they knew they were in some small way complicit in the cultural destruction of a venue which was (and still is for the time being) the beating heart of Oxford's once vibrant and world-renowned music scene.

As such, conversion to flats would clearly do harm to the heritage nature of the venue, and would not therefore represent optimum viable use of the space. Furthermore, the development cannot be justified under NPPF paragraphs 195 & 196 as being of public benefit, because neither the Heritage nor Viability Assessments have clearly demonstrated that it would bring economic, social or environmental progress.

The Wheatsheaf (including the first floor venue,) is, by the Viability Assessment's own admission, a viable, vibrant & very much alive community hub. However, with the recent closure of The Cellar and the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Centre, it is now the sole remaining dedicated music venue in the city centre (where there were 8 until just a few years ago.) It is also one of very few grass roots music venues in the city as a whole, and the only one in greater Oxford which regularly caters for rock and heavy metal (although it also plays host to many other music genres.)

Oxford is rightly proud of its contemporary music heritage, which places it on the world map, but where will the next Supergrass (another globally renowned Oxford band to have played at the Wheatsheaf) cut their teeth when all these venues are gone, or be inspired by emerging touring artists not yet big enough to play at the prohibitively expensive (for many) O2 Academy?

Viability Assessment:

The assessment's conclusion that the closure of the Wheatsheaf's music venue would not represent the loss of an integral part of Oxford's social and community value, in the context of local supply, is entirely false.

Indeed, by seeking to divert our focus to a narrowly defined set of financial metrics, the report actively seeks to marginalise the venue's importance as a heritage and community asset, which has cultural value that stretches way beyond economics.

Furthermore, the report has been compiled by Christie & Co, an accountancy practice based in London, who by their own admission, neither visited the city, nor clearly, bothered to take the time to understand the complex communities and facilities here.

Most notably, their assertion that the establishments listed in Appendix III represent an "adequate

supply of regular live music venues" serving a city of 150,000, is clearly not reflective of the reality of the current Oxford live venue 'landscape:'

- The Jericho Tavern is listed twice, which perhaps tells you everything you need to know about the 10 minutes of sloppy Google research that Christie & Co undertook.

- Of the remaining 28 'venues, only 7 are in the city centre, of which, 2 are theatres / music rooms which host almost exclusively classical music and even then, only very sporadically; 1 is an arts centre that rarely hosts music; 1 is a large town hall which rarely hosts music; 1 is a tiny piano bar which is only really suitable for open mic nights and solo pianists, and 2 are churches which, other than organ recitals and choirs, have never hosted contemporary live music as far as I'm aware.

Just 5 of the 28 venues listed host gigs with anywhere near the regularity of the Wheatsheaf and all are regularly full on the same nights, meaning there would be little scope for the Wheatsheaf's 'lost gig' capacity to be taken up elsewhere.

- The Library is tiny in comparison (and is on the Cowley Road.)

- Tap Social is not a dedicated music venue (and is in Botley.)

- The Jericho Tavern (does have a dedicated music space upstairs, but holds relatively sporadic gigs and is in Jericho. It is also not an independent venue, being part of a large chain.)

- The O2 Academy is part of the Live Nation empire and is not only expensive, but only really hosts more established artists. It too is outside the city centre on the Cowley Road.

- The Bullingdon is the only one on the list that is in some ways comparable and it too is on the Cowley Road.

Using this logic, Christie & Co would probably suggest that Glyndebourne is a suitable alternative to Glastonbury, because they are both UK-based music festivals beginning with G (although the reality is that they could hardly cater for more different audiences, both in terms of genre, demographic and capacity.)

Operational Considerations:

The commercial argument is an opportunist attempt to use the ongoing pandemic as justification and obfuscation for the upstairs venue not being commercially viable and is based, by its own admission, on incomplete accounts data and verbal discussions, which conveniently opens the door to making subjective and suspect projections.

In addition, the assessment seems disingenuous, as it estimates (offering no empirical data as

evidence) that the music venue accounts for 25% of the Wheatsheaf's total turnover, yet suggests elsewhere that this would be a "marginal loss in revenue." If close to a third of a venue's revenue is deemed marginal, their commercial analysis is surely floored.

Furthermore, the 25% estimate takes no account of the fact (as anyone who has attended gigs at the Wheatsheaf will know) that:

- A significant percentage of gig attendees buy their drinks downstairs, because the limited space in the upstairs bar limits choice and / or because they want to see friends in the downstairs bar during the breaks between acts.

- A significant aspect of the Wheatsheaf's appeal is that it is a consistently regular live music venue, so many of its clientele will drink there and poke their nose in upstairs to see who is playing. Regardless of whether they then decide to buy a ticket and move upstairs, the live music offering is an integral draw to the downstairs pub and custom will inevitably ebb away as a consequence of losing the upstairs venue (which is perhaps, the owner's long term aim anyway, so they can later justify converting the whole pub into apartments.)

- Furthermore, the suggestion in the Viability Assessment, that the reduction in running costs from the closure of the upstairs venue, might actually make the downstairs pub more profitable, is also misleading. Because so many people buy their drinks downstairs, they could already close the upstairs bar (potentially increasing gig capacity and negating the extra bar person regardless,) because there will always be an independent music promoter (not paid by the pub,) managing the venue on the door.

Finally, the assertion that the operator intends to "ensure the reputation as a music venue remains" after the closure of the upstairs venue, is also disingenuous. As anyone who knows the venue understands, the layout (bar in the centre) and lack of sound proofing of the downstairs space makes it unsuitable for anything other than small, intimate performances, which are unlikely to suit the current rock clientele and will therefore drive away many of the very customers which the Viability Assessment suggests will continue to drink there regardless.

Furthermore, the smaller space would make it commercially unviable for the sort of emerging international touring acts who regularly grace the Wheatsheaf's stage, but are already working to tight or non-existent profit margins. As such, countless opportunities for cultural exchange and artistic inspiration of our own young musicians will be lost forever.

In isolation to the uninitiated, this planning application might seem like a minor change in the grand scheme of things, but after the continual erosion of Oxford's live music venues in recent years, and in particular, the loss of The Cellar & The Deaf and Hard of Hearing Centre in 2019, the additional loss of the Wheatsheaf venue would mark a grim cultural and heritage turning point.

Oxford's live music ecosystem, which feeds a thriving community of contemporary music fans and nurtured world-beating artists like Radiohead and Glass Animals, would be severely degraded and under threat of collapse. The loss of the Wheatsheaf's upstairs venue would represent possibly the killer blow in a death by a thousand paper cuts and we would all be culturally poorer for it, even the students who were lucky enough to live in the space where the magic happened.