

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: Dr Daniel Mitchell

Address: 86 Sandfield Road Oxford OX3 7RL

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
- Local plan policies

Comment: I wish to object to this application: it contravenes the City Council's Local Plan 2036 (in particular V6 ("Culture and social activities") & V7 ("Infrastructure and cultural and community facilities")) and also paragraph 92, section c of the National Planning Policy Framework.

As noted in 8.22 of Local Plan 2036, cultural and social venues, particularly those located in the city centre, are vulnerable to redevelopment pressures from higher land value uses. Sections vi and vii of chapter 8 of Local Plan 2036 are drafted specifically to deal with this threat and venues like the Wheatsheaf are a perfect example. The Wheatsheaf is a highly valued and prestigious cultural and social venue providing facilities within the city centre. Oxford punches well above its weight in musical terms and crucially this is as much a part of our present as our heritage. If these sections of the Local Plan were designed to protect anything then it should be somewhere like The Wheatsheaf.

Specifically, policy V6 f) states that "Planning applications for the change of use of a public house must be accompanied by evidence to demonstrate that the continuation of the use of the premises as a public house is not viable. It must be demonstrated that: [...] f) all reasonable efforts have been made to support and improve the operation and management of the business."

The Viability Assessment in no way demonstrates that The Wheatsheaf is unviable. Even the weakest EBITDA margin figure in the assessment has The Wheatsheaf at 14%, well within industry average figures for pubs and bars (10-20%). Even this 14% figure is unnaturally skewed by some misleading use of the data from FY20. With only 8.5 months of income, it would be more reasonable when thinking about the long term viability of the business to compare the 8.5 months when income was being earned. When recalculated on that basis, the margin for 2020 rises to 17.5% as compared to 18.5% in 2019. Given general economic conditions this is actually a pretty spectacular performance in particular since The Wheatsheaf has no outside space. The assessment also applies various well known tricks of statistical presentation and manipulation to emphasise the point it is trying to make (eg. non zero-based y-axis making drops look more precipitous than they are and failing to have a reliable x-axis scale). This is GCSE-level stuff; the whole thing is pretty shoddily put together here as in other places.

The second contravention is Policy V7 which states that "The City Council will seek to protect and retain existing [performance venues and arts buildings]. Planning permission will NOT BE GRANTED for development that results in the LOSS OF SUCH FACILITIES UNLESS NEW OR IMPROVED FACILITIES CAN BE PROVIDED at a location equally or more accessible by walking, cycling and public transport."

Very plainly the application offers no "new or improved facilities" to replace the lost venue. The assertion that the loss of The Wheatsheaf as a music venue will have no impact on the community is completely unsupported, and has been clearly refuted by the substantial number of complaints to this application and local campaigning in support of the venue. In particular the list of alternative venues (p.37) shows a lack of understanding or knowledge of the delivery of music to the community and the realities of it. The list is predominantly irrelevant, often plainly inaccurate, and sloppily put together with the Jericho Tavern being listed twice. One cannot in all seriousness compare a venue such as The Town Hall, Holywell Music Rooms, Sheldonian or the Jacqueline du Pre with The Wheatsheaf. They are of an incomparable size, acoustically designed for a different musical style and are not equipped with appropriate facilities for rock, metal or "alternative" music. Similarly, pubs which host occasional open-mic nights or have covers bands playing on a Saturday are not the appropriate alternative venues to nationally recognised circuit venues such as The Wheatsheaf, with PAs, sound engineers, green rooms etc. Making these sorts of comparisons is disingenuous at best, baldly ignorant and wilfully misleading at worst. It's like claiming that we don't need brasserie restaurants in Oxford because there are coffee shops, or that it's fine for the Pitt Rivers museum to close because there's The Oxford Museum. The Wheatsheaf is THE ONLY music venue in the centre of Oxford which regularly hosts early stage rock, metal and indie bands. The music scene in Oxford has produced and continues to produce exceptional talent in these genres, from Radiohead and Supergrass to Ride, Stornoway and Foals. These bands are internationally renowned and started their careers in venues like The Wheatsheaf. There used to be half a dozen in the city centre. Now there's one and it is being threatened.

Finally, irrespective of the Local Plan, the National Planning Policy Framework (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/8-promoting-healthy-and-safe-communities>) 92 c) states "Planning policies and decisions should aim to achieve healthy, inclusive and safe places which: [...]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" This application very clearly contravenes this national policy.

As well as these technical grounds for arguing that the application should be denied, I think it is worth considering that, very simply, getting rid of The Wheatsheaf as a music venue in favour of a handful of flats is an act of cultural vandalism. It would be barbaric. It's not all about rock music by the way, there's also the internationally renowned jazz club "The Spin", described by The Oxford Times in Feb 2020 as "a gift to us in Oxford", and exceptional improvised and stand-up comedy from local and university groups.

Please don't let us lose this invaluable and unique community resource for a few more cramped flats with no parking. I bet the noise level will be higher from them than from the venue in any case.

Thanks for reading my objections.