

Robert Courts MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Cllr Jeff Haine
Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning
West Oxfordshire District Council
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Wednesday, 20th April 2022

Dear Jeff,

Re: Stonesfield Pub

I am writing to raise my concerns over the current situation with regard to the White Horse Pub in Stonesfield.

As you will be aware, the pub sadly closed during the pandemic and was put up for sale by the previous owners. As the pub is a listed Community Asset – something I worked with the local community to achieve when I was a District Councillor – the community were given time to raise the funds to bid for the pub.

Despite an extraordinary effort from the Stonesfield community, which raised sufficient funds to offer the asking price of £395,000, the pub was eventually sold to Mr Jonathan Bowers in January 2021. I subsequently met with Mr Bowers, who assured me repeatedly and unequivocally that he intended to reopen the pub, and told me of his vision of a thriving village pub. He told me that, after completing renovations, the pub was to be listed for tenants willing to run it as a village pub.

While the pub did indeed get listed for tenants, I became increasingly concerned that the pub had been listed at an unrealistic price, with the rent being asked for considerably higher than the market rate. Even after months passed with no interest, at no point did Mr Bowers lower the asking price. Despite numerous approaches from my office requesting a meeting with Mr Bowers, I was unable to meet with him to raise the concerns I, and the Stonesfield community, had over the listing and his true intentions for the pub.

Sadly, our suspicions appear to have been well-founded. I recently received notification that Mr Bowers is seeking to sell the pub to a property investment company in London.

As you will be aware, in accordance with the Localism Act 2011 and the pub's status as a Community Asset, Mr Bowers must notify the District Council of his intention to sell the property. This will then trigger the 'Community Right to Bid' moratorium, during which the community will have six months to prepare a bid. **Has Mr Bowers notified WODC of his intention to sell the pub and, if so, please could you confirm when this moratorium will begin?**

Stonesfield residents and I are understandably concerned that the potential new owners of the pub will, in due course, seek to make an application with the District Council for a change of use for the property (from pub to residential), citing that it is unviable to run it as a pub.

I am therefore writing pre-emptively to place on my record my view that any such change of use application should be rejected.

It is clearly false to claim that it is unviable to run it as a pub: Mr Bowers did not list the property at a reasonable rate and evidently had no real intention to attempt to run it as a pub. Furthermore, the community remains committed to purchasing the pub and running it in the best interests of the community. Their vision of a successful village pub that serves as the hub of the community is something we should all support.

We are fortunate in West Oxfordshire to boast a wide array of thriving village pubs, and I have no doubt that **Stonesfield can and should boast a pub that the entire local community enjoy and are proud of.** I have no doubt that the District Council will continue to support them to do so.

Robert Courts MP

*From the Member of Parliament for the constituency of Witney in West Oxfordshire
including Bampton, Burford, Carterton, Charlbury, Chipping Norton, Eynsham, Witney and Woodstock.*