

The Green Dragon, 8 Churchway, Haddenham:

Application 19/03535/APP by for “Change of use public house to single residential dwelling”

Haddenham Village Society Response to AVDC

Introduction

1. Haddenham Village Society, founded in 1965, seeks to preserve the village’s heritage, ethos and community spirit as Haddenham expands and develops with the addition new households as part of its expansion as a “strategic settlement”
2. Membership of the Society represents over 300 households in the village, approximately 20% of the current village population.
3. The Society objects to the proposed change of use on a number of grounds which are detailed below.

Impact upon Conservation Area and Village Heritage Assets

4. The Green Dragon is Grade 2 listed building located at the heart of the Haddenham Conservation Area. In addition to the architectural significance noted in the 2008 Conservation Area Review the building has held a long role as a public building acting as both as a coaching inn, public house and home to the Court Leet until 1924. Indeed the pub is named for the emblem of the Earl of Pembroke when he was lord of the Haddenham and Thame area.
5. The Draft VALP, which it is intended will be adopted by the end of the year, details the approach which should be taken in considering heritage assets. This includes not only the physical presence of the building within the environment, but also the collective experience and memory of a place and the meaning that it holds for people who relate to it (ref paras 8.29 and 8.31 p 215). Policy BE1 says the Council will “require development proposals that cause substantial harm to, or loss of a designated heritage asset and its significance, including its setting, to provide a thorough heritage assessment setting out a clear and convincing justification as to why that harm is considered acceptable. Where that cannot be demonstrated proposals will not be supported”.
6. The Green Dragon lies at the heart of the oldest part of the village at Church End. This is the backdrop to much of village life and many of the key events in the calendar: the Mayday parade and dancing, Haddenham Fete, the Annual Fair, the events of the recently revived Haddenham Feast and the Village Society Annual Dinner. Activity is a key contributory factor to the significance of this building. It is important not just for its historic, physical presence but for the role which it plays in the community. Change of use will

further reduce space for public engagement and take another heritage asset out of the public domain. The character of this key part of the Conservation Area will be eroded by this change of use to another single private dwelling.

7. The Haddenham Neighbourhood Plan (as amended) has been adopted by AVDC as part of its own development plan. This document reinforces the policy above by stating that “combined with the statutory protection of the Conservation Area, and the ongoing focus to conserve and enhance the historic environment and heritage assets in the Parish, the function of community amenities should also be protected because of their importance to village life and enjoyment by the residents of Haddenham and surrounding villages; development plans that result in their loss or significant harm will be resisted” (para 9.3.1).

8. The upfront advice from the heritage team in our view focused too much on the physical impact of the application on this listed building and did not take into account significant heritage harm that will arise from the change of use. A large number of appeal decisions have refused the change of use of pubs to residential in a conservation area because Inspectors have rightly given priority to the importance of a pub to the character of a conservation area, and the harm caused to the community by the loss of another valued facility.

Community Asset

9. Para 83 of the NPPF highlights the need for planning policy and the decisions made to allow “the retention and development of accessible local services and community facilities, such as local shops, meeting places, sports venues, open space, cultural buildings, public houses and places of worship.”

10. The Haddenham Neighbourhood Plan underlines this in Policy HWS2 - Protecting Community Assets. “The retention and enhancement of local services and community facilities including shops, pubs, food outlets and commercial services will be supported. Proposals involving the loss of facilities will not be permitted unless it can be demonstrated that they are no longer financially viable, whilst proposals to change the use of an asset must demonstrate that all reasonable steps have been taken to retain its present use and community value as a viable concern”.

11. The Green Dragon was nominated as an Asset of Community Value and this was approved by AVDC in December 2015. The application highlighted the role of the pub in holding regular events attracting members of the local community and beyond and as a meeting place for community groups such as Haddenham U3A, Haddenham Community Infant School PTA and Carers Society. When last open 90% of the staff on site were also locally based and the pub was an important employment opportunity in the village, particularly for young people. In approving AVDC noted that the “use furthers the social

wellbeing and social interests of the local community and that the land is of community value”.

12. The loss of this pub as a hub of activity causes harm to the community and local environment. The removal of a place where members of the public can meet and socialise will be lost. The removal of the signage and lighting will harm the building’s appearance and further deaden the hustle and bustle at the heart of the village. The car park forms part of the transport provision for St Mary’s Infant School, forming part of the planned areas for drop off/ collection. Now that the gates are closed this good community use of the land at off peak times for the pub is ended and even more cars clog the narrow roads. Until recently there were 3 pubs, shops and a bank in the area. All are now closed and the village will be harmed if the opportunity for them to be revived is taken away.

Ongoing Viability

13. We do not believe that the applicant has in any way showed that the Green Dragon is not a viable business proposition. The report by Bruton Knowles is confused and inaccurate in many of its assertions:

- They acknowledge that they have little information about past trading success. In fact a number of tenants have traded successfully in the last ten to fifteen years, most often with a strong food offering, attracting local accolades and entry in the Good Pub Guide. More recently tenants have struggled for a number of reasons (e.g. focus on wine bar format more suited to a town environment, focus on fine dining with little family appeal) but also because of the onerous provisions of the lease from Enterprise Inns who owned the Green Dragon until May 2019.
- They refer to population statistics which do not take into account the large number of houses completed since the 2011 census and those currently being built. The strategic planning is for some additional 1,000 houses which will take the village population to approximately 7,000.
- They state that there is little passing trade. This pub is in the heart of what is known as one of the most attractive villages in the area. There are many things which bring people to the area: events/ concerts/weddings/funerals at the church, the very popular Tythe Barn which operates for approx. 5 weeks of the year, National Garden scheme open days, village events on the green, tourist trails and even bus tours stopping to look at the locations (including the Green Dragon itself) where Midsomer Murders has been filmed.
- They state that most of the income would be from drink sales. This has not been and in the future is unlikely to be a drinks led pub. Later in the detailed viability they refer to 50% of income being from food. I am not sure they have really thought at all about how the Green Dragon has operated in the past, or what its ongoing appeal would be. In fact it would appear that this section is just cut and

pasted from another report as in the first line of the Turnover section they refer to “previous owners of the Victoria”.

- They look at viability purely from the point of view of an investor running the pub for a financial return. It does not take into account the wider interest from community or family groups supporting a new business with potential to develop and expand. I would urge that the CAMRA Public House Viability Test (www.camra.org.uk/campaign_resources/public-house-viability-test) is used by AVDC in considering this application as it takes a much more balanced approach.

14. When the pub was placed on the market in November 2018 a Community Interest Group was formed but the six month period allowed was not sufficient time to form the necessary legal entity and the raise the capital to buy the freehold. Given more time a bid would have been made and indeed we understand that another village group, supporting a local chef, made an offer on the building to run it as a dining pub. This was turned down in favour of the bid from the current applicant who returned the pub to the market very shortly after purchase. It cannot be said that there has been no interest over the short time that the pub has been marketed.

15. The application is silent on the true terms under which the freehold is currently being marketed. These include an overage provision of 70% of the betterment value in the event of change of use for a period of 70 years in favour of the seller. This will considerably limit the number of parties who are able to bid as it would be a major stumbling block in obtaining finance secured on the property value. The freehold is being marketed at the same level that was paid in May when the sale was unencumbered, without reflecting the impact of the newly imposed overage provision. This will reduce the number of potential bidders considerably.

16. The Bruton Knowles report highlights that fact that the rate of pub closures is slowing and that there is increased activity in the sale of freehold pubs where values are slowly rising. Local examples are that of the Dinton Hermit in Ford where after being closed since 2013 the pub is about to undergo refurbishment before a planned re-opening in November and the Harrow in Bishopstone where the pub has been refurbished and reopens late October after being closed for 5 years with a new dining led business model.

17. At the public Planning Committee meeting of the Parish Council the applicant made reference to the need to convert the pub quickly to prevent the building from deteriorating. This conflicts with the view of Bruton Knowles who state that “the building is in a relatively good internal state of repair” and in any event NPPF guidance is clear that any deterioration in the fabric of a listed building should be discounted when looking at development.

Sustainability

18. When Haddenham was identified as a strategic settlement in the draft VALP it followed a Settlement Hierarchy Assessment. This in part looked at facilities and services within the village which could support any expansion of the built environment. Pubs were identified as a “key” facility. At the time the assessment was undertaken there were five pubs in the village, of which the Red Lion, The Rose and Thistle and the Green Dragon were all at Church End. Currently only 2 pubs are open in the village, none at this key village location. With 280 new houses being built on Aston Road, within a short walking distance of the Green Dragon, there is a significant opportunity for the pub to improve its business particularly with its location in the historic heart of the village. If we lose this “key” facility the ability for the village to welcome and integrate these new residents will be significantly reduced and it will adversely impact the sustainability of the development as people, once again, turn to their cars to travel to other local pubs which are further away.

Conclusion

19. Haddenham Village Society requests Aylesbury Vale District Council to reject this application. It is contrary to NPPF, the draft VALP and the Neighbourhood Plan and will have a significant negative impact upon Haddenham village residents as they try to maintain the sense of community which is at the heart of our work as the Village Society.

20. We fully support the comments submitted by the Parish Council and will work with them to make representations should the matter proceed to Planning Committee or an appeal.