



# Campaign for Pubs

Promote, Support and Protect Pubs

Cllr Martin Tod  
Leader  
Winchester City Council  
The Guildhall  
City Offices  
Colebrook Street  
Winchester  
SO23 9LJ

25<sup>th</sup> January 2024

Dear Cllr Tod,

## **URGENT – the Corner House pub / Forester’s Arms, Winchester**

We are writing to you about the bizarre and troubling case of the historic Corner House pub (originally the Forester’s Arms) and urging you, as Leader of the Council, to step in and take action, to prevent the unnecessary loss of this pub.

We are asking specifically that you stop/withdraw the planning application and allow for a proper consideration of the future of the Corner House/Forester’s, including as a pub, something that has so far been denied both by the previous owners **and also by the direct action of Winchester City Council to buy the pub as a development opportunity**, something we were staggered – and frankly appalled – to hear about.

Winchester City Council has not carried out any assessment of the pub’s viability. As the only pub serving that immediate area, it is certainly viable in the right hands (and not in the hands of a pubco that operates the unfair ‘tied’ model). Nor has the Council done any genuine consultation with the local community that includes the possibility of this community retaining its pub. This is unacceptable.

We are aware that the previous owners, Hong Kong owned pubco Greene King, with a history of selling off pubs for development, put the pub up for sale, but at what was clearly an inflated price. Consequently, the pub wasn’t bought as a pub. As a result of this, Winchester City Council stepped in and bought it (with taxpayers’ money) and is now applying for permission (to its own planning department!) to convert it to residential use.

At a time when communities and councillors up and down the country are fighting against ‘predatory purchasing’ of pubs, it is absolutely extraordinary that Winchester City Council have themselves engaged in predatory purchasing by buying a pub to convert it (and doing so using taxpayers’ money!). We are supporting communities – and indeed pro-pub councils – up and down the country in fighting against developers buying pubs (from owners selling them deliberately over the lawful planning use value) with the deliberate intent of destroying the pub permanently and converting to alternative use. This is exactly what Winchester City Council has done and it frankly beggars belief.

We also find it extraordinary that considering Winchester City Council has policy obligations to resist the unnecessary closure of pubs (and with a local plan that reflects that), that it has itself bought a

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pub with the deliberate intention to convert it. This is undermining your own local development plan. Alas many owners of pubs will seek to get the inflated development value of a pub, if they think they can get away with it and so collude with developers who target pubs to buy them to redevelop. It is the role of the planning system is to regulate this. In this case, the developer and the planner are one and the same thing, so rather than supporting the aims of the planning system, Winchester City Council is marking its own homework!

There is also therefore clearly a conflict of interest with Winchester City Council applying to Winchester City Council for permission to wipe this pub permanently off the map (and cashing in by developing it or selling it to a developer). In our view – and this is a much wider issue than just pubs - it is both absurd and wrong that Councils apply to themselves for planning permission for their own applications. This should be changed. Applications by councils should clearly not be dealt with themselves, but by the planning inspectorate.

We find Winchester City Council's predatory purchasing of the pub even more disappointing considering that some pro-pub Councils are actively working with communities to help them save pubs. We support the 'CPO Club' campaign of communities which calls on their councils to buy pubs, as pubs, when owners are deliberately seeking to frustrate attempts to re-open them or to buy them at a fair price as a pub. This is something more councils should do (and then sell or lease the pub to an appropriate operator or the community, with a covenant to ensure it remains as a pub). However, for a Council to buy pubs to permanently close them is appalling and we are dismayed that Winchester City Council has done this, effectively colluding with Hong Kong owned Greene King in their cynical asset stripping.

The importance of pubs is explicitly enshrined in the National Planning Policy Framework and must be the basis of any decision on an application to convert a public house, especially a historic one.

Policies 83 and 92 of the NPPF say that councils should seek to plan positively for the provision of pubs and to resist their loss:

Section 83 d) states “**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”,

Section 92 states “To provide the **social, recreational** and cultural facilities and services the community needs, planning policies and decisions should:

- a) **plan positively for the provision and use of shared spaces, community facilities** (such as local shops, meeting places, sports venues, open space, cultural buildings, **public houses** and places of worship) and other local services to enhance the sustainability of communities and residential environments;
- b) **take into account and support the delivery of local strategies** to improve health, **social** and cultural **well-being** for all sections of the community;
- c) **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.

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The conversion of the Corner House/Forester's would be an unnecessary loss of a pub and contrary to *'planning positively for the provision of community facilities, including public houses.'* which means Winchester City Council should reject its own planning application – but of course because there is a clear bias and conflict of interest, it will not!

What makes this worse, as the local community realised, that due to the very clear conflict of interest arising from the position the Council has put itself in, there was no point applying to the Council to seek Asset of Community Value (ACV status) because the Council would have refused it, to prevent this frustrating its own plans. This is a corruption of the whole community planning system and is denying the legal rights of Winchester citizens to seek such status.

The other extraordinary thing about the Council's decision is that if Winchester City Council approves its own application to convert this historic pub, it would set a very dangerous precedent which other developers would seek to capitalise on. How could the Council then refuse further such applications for perfectly viable pubs, when the Council itself has been guilty of predatory purchasing and the deliberate destruction of a historic pub to turn into flats?

We have consistently highlighted the national scandal where pubs, especially historic pubs, are lost when cynical owners sell them at an inflated price, to profit at the expense of the pub and community by overpricing a pub and selling off a viable pub for development. This should be made illegal. A historic pub should only ever be converted if there is no one who wants to buy it as a pub, at the independently marketed value as pub. This is precisely what [our 'Give Pubs Protection' policy](#) calls for. This is the only way to stop the deliberate asset stripping of pubs, which is something that is a threat to our pub culture, our heritage and history as a nation and to community cohesion in the communities affected. This policy would also be a big help to councils, as it would mean that the planning framework would make the situation regarding pubs and planning much clearer and stop cynical attempts to run down and sell off pubs for development. We would hope therefore that you and Winchester City Council would support this sensible change to the law.

If implemented, all historic pubs, like the Corner House/Forester's, would have the chance of being retained as a pub. It would also then make clear where a pub can be deemed 'no longer wanted' rather than being deliberately bought and sold and 'asset-stripped', as has happened to the historic Corner House/Forester's due to Greene King selling it for above the pub value and Winchester City Council buying for redevelopment.

To summarise why you should step into stop this and give this historic pub the chance of remaining as a pub:

- The conversion of the pub goes against the clear wording of the NPPF. This is not a "necessary" nor justified loss of a historic pub.
- The permanent loss of the pub would be detrimental to the community and to the area.
- The pub was put up for sale by a company well known for selling pubs off for redevelopment and at a price that was clearly based on development hope value rather than realistic valuation according to lawful planning use.

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- The pub has not been marketed for any reasonable length of time as a pub and should be, before any decision is made for permanent loss.
- There is a serious conflict of interest with Winchester City Council seeking permission from itself to go against its own local plan and the National Planning Policy Framework.
- Approving this application would set a precedent and make it much harder for the Council to oppose other developers seeking to predatory purchase pubs and buy them for development, thus undermining your own local plan.

We urge you to listen and act. Please conduct a proper consultation with the local community and with operators who would run this historic pub as a pub. Please also commission a proper independent viability study (not carried out by the Council, due to the clear conflict of interest).

Please give this pub a chance.

Yours sincerely,



James Watson  
Pubs Protection Adviser



Dawn Hopkins  
Vice-Chair

cc South Hampshire CAMRA branch  
Steve Brine MP, MP for Winchester