

Report on The Oak public meeting

The Parish council held a public meeting to discuss the derelict Oak Pub. This meeting was called as the owners, DLM Investments, have notified ABC that they wish to dispose of the site. Due to the Asset of Community Value status, ABC have to be notified of an intent to sell. The community are required to notify ABC by the 11th March if they wish to trigger a full six month moratorium which would last until July 29th. The purpose of such a moratorium is to give a community group time to prepare a bid and raise funds. During the six months the owners can only sell to a community group; after that time the owners can sell to whoever they wish.

If no notification is made by March 11th, then the owners can sell on the open market. (This does not stop a community group making a bid.)

Below is a summary of the public meeting.

The Chairman of the parish council opened the meeting and introduced the speakers: Jill Leyland, previous parish council chair, & Robin Draper from The George at Bethersden community group. There were 106 residents in attendance. Cllr Prinn explained that the parish council could offer support but could not lead the Community Bid. If that was the wish of residents, a Community Group would need to be formed to lead the project. At this time the Council are unaware of the the value the owners are hoping to sell for and we do not know if the whole of the building is up for sale or if the “manager’s flat” created out of former letting bedrooms will be held back.

Jill Leyland went into the background of The Oak (details can be found on our website). Jill also explained that it is currently possible to apply to the government for a grant of up to £250,000. (Other potential grants may also exist.) Help and advice is also available from the Plunkett Foundation (eg in how to set up a Community company).

Jill explained that a previous community group had, with the help of the Plunkett Foundation, had a top level survey and a valuation indepently carried out. The valuation was £425,000 if restored and ready to go as a pub but without an existing

clientele. Given the substantial extent of the work needed to repair the deteriorating state an offer was made for £200,000; this was rejected. Mr Brar (the lead owner) subsequently put the Oak (excluding the “manager’s flat”) up for auction in 2018 with an asking price of £325, 000; no offers were made. (DLM Investments had paid £445,00 for the building in 2016.)

The current Asset of Community Value status runs until July 2026; because the building has been empty for so long it will be hard to get another ACV in place .

Robin Draper explained that the process of community acquisition is simple to follow. At Bethersden four people formed a group and put ideas together. They applied to the Plunkett Foundation who gave them legal and practical financial advice. They had a valuation of the building and put this to the owner. They applied to the Community Ownership Fund who gave them a grant of £250,000. Robin recommended involving our local MP and getting the community involved in fundraising events. They also put together a prospectus and sold shares with the minimum being £500, max £20,000. No matter how many shares you have you only have one vote. They started by just selling drinks and then started food in the restaurant when the kitchen had been refurbished. The group employs a general manager for the day to day running of the pub and she hires the rest of the staff. The pub also acts as a coffee shop.

Various questions were asked at the meeting from residents, some of which we did not have the answers to at this present time and due to the timescale given.

A number of residents interested in potentially being part of a core group to take matters forward gave their contact details to the clerk. Anyone else interested in being part of the core group are asked to contact the clerk who will put everyone in touch so that an initial meeting can be arranged shortly.