

21/00369/F - Kirtlington Post Office Stores - resubmission of application for change of use to residential

Kirtlington Parish Council comments on the application

At the Kirtlington Parish Council (KPC) meeting of 9th March 2021, KPC members requested extra time to consider the planning application for change of use at Kirtlington Post Office Stores (21/00369/F), with the Cherwell District Council Case Officer subsequently granting additional time for the submission of comments.

KPC met (remotely) on 19th March 2021 to consider the advice of the Planning Sub-committee, and debate the position to be adopted for submission of comment to Cherwell District Council, noting that notwithstanding the emotive elements of (for and against) the application and its implications, KPC comment on a planning application must concentrate on the material planning considerations.

A (minuted) discussion of approximately 2 hours covered the following areas of consideration:

- The changes in Material Planning considerations to differentiate this from the original application, noting that there have been no changes to the publicly available documents as submitted previously, whereas the Case Officer has confirmed that additional financial information has been submitted. As this information is confidential and not available for disclosure to the Parish Council, it was not possible to determine whether this provides sufficient evidence to support the applicant's claim that the Post Office/shop is no longer financially viable at the premises in question. The application itself is largely unchanged with parts of the accompanying 'Planning Design and Access Statement' still unclear and/or in need of updating.
- Whether there was evidence that the shop has been advertised as an operational, commercial entity at a reasonable price, where the Parish Council has previously been advised (anecdotally) that marketing attempts have been made three times in the past, no details of advertisements or the marketed price were available to review to ascertain the viability of a sale, and none are understood to have been made within the preceding 12 month period (with due consideration to the COVID-19 situation, and ensuing Lockdowns).
- Whether there was demonstrable evidence that the shop as a service is non-viable rather than a particular business model used by the current or previous owners / operator, noting as above that financial information to support or refute this has not been disclosed. The functional and material (building fabric condition) limitations of the existing premises with regards to upkeep, layout, access and parking were also considered as limiting factors to this given the changing user demographic and their retail habits, noting that separation of the Retail and Accommodation elements might offer an opportunity for viability, under investment.
- Whether Kirtlington could still support a village shop, as viewed in relation to the number of residences and both population density and demographic, as compared to surrounding villages which appear to support shops sufficiently among their amenities - both privately owned, and publicly (community) run - and in the context of current retail models both past, before and during the current pandemic, noting that while marginal in terms of population, the A4095 location might both mitigate (for passing trade) and present constraints (parking, etc.).
- The value/amenity of a village shop and / or a Post Office for the village in terms of the essential needs of the elderly, vulnerable and mobility-restricted (including the difficulties faced in reaching alternatives in surrounding villages), the convenience to the wider population and the wider Planning considerations with regard to the Category A status of the village being dependent in part on the number and range of services and facilities within the village, e.g., shop, a primary school, public house(s), etc. - noting also the benefits of retaining this facility as applied to the sustainability of Kirtlington as a village against the difficulties in regaining a Village Post Office service contract if lost at this stage, while the nearest alternative (Weston-on-the-Green) appears to thrive.
- The value of the Post Office to a village shop owner, discussed as (anecdotally, in lieu of the financial information as above) to be understood as being of an additional revenue stream in itself and noting that the existing Post Office has 'Old Community Post Office' status,

understood to provide a salary for the owner (current or future, as sold on) plus a yearly fee, whereas all new Post Office contracts are understood to now attract a fee only. A Post Office offering a facility for increased online shopping returns and other counter services in one consolidated location where traditional high-street providers e.g. banks are closing, might reasonably be considered to benefit a retail shop with impromptu purchases otherwise not sufficient to warrant a dedicated visit – noting also that the nearby Bletchingdon Co-Operative have stated no intention to pursue a Post Office Contract, on grounds assumed to be either demand and / or commercial potentially relating to the much less favourable financial terms offered for all new Post Office contracts.

- The effect of the timing of the application during the unprecedented events of the last 12 months, which have been catastrophic for all shop-fronted retail establishments unable to rely on online outlets to survive the COVID lockdown, and which have made the future unpredictable with regard to a return to past norms, as while arguably a local shop in a community restricted to 'essential travel' only ought to have been able to capitalise on supply of provisions, was recognised as not only unrepresentative of the trading conditions leading to the application, but also unsubstantiated given the closure of the shop at the start of the first Lockdown, with currently limited (and unpredictable) Post Office opening times.
- Whether there is any potential for replacements elsewhere in the village if the Post Office and shop are lost, including and beyond the potential for a Community owned and / or run Shop – specifically the parishioner group investigating the potential for a community shop (without a Post Office) at the Dashwood Arms at the time of the previous application. While recognising the significant support from villagers from the outset of this process and the importance of a shop for the village, as shown by the willingness of many households to commit to regular purchases and to support the ad-hoc Farmers' Markets held in the Dashwood's car park (in contrast to the lack of patronage of the village shop before its closure), this group suspended the project on 20 February 2021, advising its supporters that it was unviable on a risk/reward basis, and has since advised the Parish Council (privately) that based on the reported financial and business models investigated the project was concluded as being unsustainable.
- The (limited) likelihood or possibility of any other village premises in the future making an application for change of use (from residential) to Commercial property to facilitate any re-establishment of a Shop and / or Post Office being considered very severely restricted, and likely constrained to the Village Hall.
- The position of the Parish Council in regard to its obligations to preserve the sustainability of the village and in respect of membership of the Mid-Cherwell Neighbourhood Plan and Forum, and in respect of those to represent the will of the village as expressed in the letters in response to the application as lodged on the CDC Planning portal.

Considering the above points at length, and significantly in the absence of detailed information on the viability of both the present establishment and the effects of the premises itself on this, and additionally of the previously-proposed Community-run option, the meeting concluded with an inconclusive vote of 3 in support of, and 3 objecting to the application – the Parish Council resolving to report as such with reference to the points considered as above.