

The future of Speen Stores and Post Office – September report from the Working Group and invitation to object to Bucks Housing Association’s planning application

Introduction

This update from the Working Group explains our view on the best way forward for Speen Stores and Post Office. (The names of Working Group members are listed at the end.) BHA’s recent planning application for a change of use for the first floor of the premises raises substantial concerns which villagers will wish to register with Wycombe District Council.

Our work confirms that Speen Stores and Post Office, which is currently managed as a commercial operation, is a successful, thriving business which enjoys strong support within the village. We therefore see every prospect that it will continue to flourish in due course under new management.

1. The current situation and next steps

- a. Bob Templeman wishes to stop running the shop and post office in December 2020. He holds the lease on the shop premises (including the upper floor) from BHA until September 2021.
- b. The Working Group has established that for the PO to retain its existing operating model, including the protected ‘community status’ we believe it holds, continuity of trade is crucial.
- c. Bob and Ali said in their March letter to the village that the shop, its fixtures and fittings, is available for £30,000 excluding VAT. They expressed a strong preference for the village to take over the running of the shop as a community enterprise. Following a thorough investigation of the practicalities, the Working Group is unable to recommend this option. Our preferred outcome is that another commercial tenant buys the business and takes a lease on the premises from BHA.
- d. Bob and Ali have now been able to negotiate the sale of their shop business and post office to a third party. We wish them well for the sale.
- e. It will be necessary for the new shopkeeper to negotiate a new lease with BHA. However, BHA has recently submitted a planning application to Wycombe District Council for a change of use for the first floor. If approved, this would make a shop on the ground floor unviable.
- f. The Working Group urges villagers and village organisations to write to the Council by 16 September objecting to the application. A note of guidance on how to object is attached, together with the Working Group’s own letter of objection.**
- g. As villagers will be aware, the King William IV pub has been registered as an Asset of Community Value. We will now urgently explore the possibility of similarly registering the Speen Stores premises.

2. The Working Group’s work and conclusions

We undertook to examine workable solutions to enable the shop and post office to continue. In view of Bob’s strong preference for the village to take over the running of the shop, we made it our priority to investigate that option, through contact with the Plunkett Foundation (which supports rural community ventures, particularly shops), and managers of community shops. Our detailed investigations involved:

- a. Reviewing relevant information, including:
- Documents, eg the current lease with BHA; shop accounts for the last four years which show that the shop has a healthy turnover and profit margin; a floor plan of the shop; plans drawn up in conjunction with BHA in 2018 to extend the premises; and a list of the shop's physical assets;
 - The Land Registry entry for the shop premises. Title BM209327 shows that planning permission was granted for the construction of five low costs houses and a shop in July 1997; and
 - The views and knowledge of Speen residents.
- b. Holding meetings: with Bob and Ali to clarify their expectations and plans; and with the CEO of BHA, to understand BHA's plans for the premises and thoughts on the future of the shop. He was supportive of the shop continuing in business.
- c. Detailed research into the practicalities of setting up and running a community shop. In addition to the need to raise funds to purchase the shop business and the financial risk that entails, there are three key elements:
- Setting up a legal entity to enable the village to take over the lease of the shop, to trade, employ staff, manage volunteers and enter into contracts and financial agreements
 - Establishing a membership structure for democratic governance and a volunteer management committee
 - Managing the shop and post office as a going concern (strategic direction, staffing, troubleshooting, reporting).

Setting up and running such a business would require considerable time, energy and effort. The majority (60%) of community shops employ paid managers / supervisors (sometimes several) as well as a large panel of volunteers (the average on rota is 20, but over 30 is not unusual). Recruiting, retaining and managing volunteers is a major challenge. A minority of shops operate entirely without volunteers, but still require a volunteer management committee.

The Working Group took into account our knowledge of Speen and its many active voluntary organisations. We conclude that Speen does not have spare voluntary capacity in the volume and timescale needed to set up and maintain a community-led business. Therefore, **we do not recommend setting up a community enterprise to run the village shop as a workable solution in the present situation. Our preferred solution is for Bob to find a third party to purchase the shop and post office business, which he is now doing.**

Issued on behalf of the Speen Stores Working Group (Members: Adrian Farley, Peter Johnson, Henry Lane, Sandy Mitcheson and Nick Ridley, with Sue Wakefield as acting Chair, supported by Mike Maisey, Christopher Boyce and Sue Taylor)

Speenstorescrusaders@gmail.com September 2020