



## Assets of Community Value: Black Horse Pub

House of Commons, December 2, 2022

Speech by James Murray MP (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op)

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I am very glad that the subject of my first Adjournment debate is such a popular and important pub in the middle of Greenford, in the heart of my constituency. The Black Horse pub, which dates back as far as 1726, is a place where families, workers, and regulars from all parts of the local community come together. The pub sits in Oldfield Lane North alongside the Grand Union Canal, with the canal not only providing the setting for the beer garden, but bringing the pub extra customers who have moored their boats nearby. It hosts live music events, sporting events, quiz nights and fun days, and I have heard that it used to host a weekly karaoke night. I am told there are plans to bring the karaoke night back, and I hope very much to be there for that—parliamentary business allowing.

One reason I am telling the House about what the Black Horse has to offer is, of course, my wish to encourage people to visit it whenever they are in the area, but I also want to help the House to understand the role that it plays in the local community, and why there was such deep concern about rumours that its owners, Fuller's, were considering selling it off. Just across the road from the Black Horse thousands of new flats are being built, so when rumours began to circulate that the pub's owners might be considering selling it for housing, people feared the worst. I therefore wrote to Fuller's in June last year to ask about its intentions, and I have to say that its response was concerning. That response stated:

“It has been interesting to see the development in Greenford and the recent sale of The Railway”, another pub nearby. Fuller's went on to say:

“if we can see a strong future, particularly around strong local community engagement, we like to invest for the long term. If not we do look at alternatives.”

Frankly, that reply sent alarm bells ringing, so I launched a petition to show Fuller's how strongly people feel about the importance of protecting the Black Horse for the future. In less than a week, the petition had attracted well over 1,000 signatures, more than three quarters of which were from either the UB6 post-code area, where the Black Horse is located, or from one of the postcode areas immediately nearby. Fuller's put out a press statement in response to the petition saying that, at the time, it had “no plans to close it”, but it did not go further in setting out its commitment to the pub, and the careful wording of its response did not provide the reassurance we sought.

It was clear that local people wanted greater protection for such an important local asset, so in March this year, I was very glad to call a public meeting in the pub to formally create the new Protect the Black Horse group.

Over 80 people came to this meeting to agree the constitution for the new group, hold our first annual general meeting and appoint our management committee. This public meeting established Protect the Black Horse as a constituted, not-for-profit community group set up to support efforts to protect the pub. I am very pleased that today, in the Public Gallery of the House of Commons, are fellow members of the committee Sarita, Brian, Sindy, Mel and James.

Over the last six months, I and the other members of the committee have been working together to apply to Ealing Council to try to get the pub listed as an asset of community value. We know that being listed by the council as an asset of community value does not provide absolute protection for pubs, but it does mean that if Fuller's tried to sell the Black Horse, we would be able to block it from doing so for six months. During that time, we would have the chance to put together a community bid to buy the pub instead. We also know that being listed as an asset of community value would help to keep the Black Horse as a pub, whoever owns it. That is because being listed as an asset of community value can be an important consideration in deciding planning applications, therefore making it harder for anyone to get permission to change it from a pub into flats.

I owe a great debt of thanks to the Co-operative party for all its support and advice in our efforts to make the asset of community value application as strong as possible. I also pay tribute to CAMRA, the Campaign for Real Ale, for its invaluable advice. One of my first meetings as an MP, on an evening barely a month after I was elected, was in the Black Horse with the local West Middlesex branch of CAMRA, so we have long had a shared interest in protecting the future of this pub.

After our application to make the Black Horse an asset of community value had been submitted to Ealing Council, I became aware that the council had received a legal letter from Fuller's lawyers, Freeths, objecting to what we were seeking to do. This 17-page legal letter pressed the council to consider the application invalid. The letter cautioned that:

“listing of a property can have severe and far-reaching consequences for the owners of listed properties”.

It went on to warn—perhaps even, implicitly, to threaten—that the listing of a property as an asset of community value:

“can also have serious consequences for listing councils, who are placed at risk of the requirement to compensate affected owners where an inappropriate nomi-



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-nation is accepted”.

However, we were not deterred. We pressed on, strengthened the application and waited for Ealing Council to come to its determination. I am very glad to report that, in August this year, Ealing Council took the excellent decision to approve the Black Horse’s listing as an asset of community value.

I mention the letter from Fuller’s lawyers, Freeths, for two reasons. First, I felt it was a rather heavy-handed and lengthy letter from a company that genuinely had no plans to sell the premises, so I consider the fact that it was sent to be some evidence of Fuller’s true intentions. Secondly, and more importantly for this debate, I aim to draw the Minister’s attention to the fact that some owners may try to deploy such legalistic tactics, perhaps in an attempt to discourage applicants and councils from pursuing potential listings as assets of community value.

This seems to be an approach that CAMRA is well aware of. In its guide to the asset of community value process, CAMRA points out that the process of nomination ought to be straightforward. It explains that: “Judges have confirmed that the legislation sets the bar very low in terms of what should be registered.”

However, CAMRA also recognises that the process can sometimes become less straightforward. In CAMRA’s view, in some cases this is a result of “pressures brought to bear” on councils by owners who have “reasons for resisting” asset of community value registration. I would welcome the Minister looking into the use of such heavy-handed legal approaches to try to undermine the asset of community value process and consider what steps the Government can take to discourage such tactics from being deployed in future.

I also encourage the Minister to consider other ways in which the process of protecting assets of community value can be strengthened, as my colleagues in the Opposition have suggested. At the moment, if the Black Horse were put up for sale, we in the community would only have a right to bid alongside others. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), the shad-

ow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, has set out, we believe that there should be a new community right to buy, so that rather than being one bidder among others, the community would have first refusal on buying the asset. We also propose that such a move should sit alongside a doubling of the current six-month moratorium period on a sale to 12 months to help communities to find time to acquire finance.

Local people across the country want greater control over important local assets being sold off and lost to the community. Over the last year and a half, local people in Greenford have made their view clear that they want to protect the Black Horse from being sold off and turned into flats. The comments and actions of the pub’s owners have given us cause for concern, so I am grateful to Sarita, Brian, Sindy, Mel and James—my fellow members of the “Protect the Black Horse” committee—for their help in applying to Ealing Council to get the pub listed as an asset of community value.

We are glad to have been successful in getting the Black Horse listed, but our experience has exposed some of the difficulties that others may face in making a similar application. We are also aware of the limits to the protection that such a listing offers, so I urge the Government to give people in Greenford and across the country greater control over what happens to pubs and other important places in our local communities.

When the Minister responds, I would be grateful for his comments on the use of heavy-handed legal tactics, such as those I described, from asset owners, which are against the spirit of the asset of community value process. I would be grateful for an undertaking that he will consider the ways in which communities can be given greater control over important local assets in future. Finally, I would be grateful if he joined me in congratulating all those who have helped to get the Black Horse listed as an asset of community value. I hope to take the members of the Black Horse committee for a drink later to thank them for coming to the House of Commons for this debate. I close by making it clear that the Minister, and you, of course, Mr Deputy Speaker, are more than welcome to join us.

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