

Councillor Gavin Corbett on possibilities for the Fruitmarket site

Green Councillor, Gavin Corbett reviews the prospects for the Fruitmarket site in Hutchison-Chesser and what it tells us about the planning system.

The local landscape seems to be dominated by planning and property at the moment, from Craighouse, in the south-west of the area I represent, to Fountainbridge in the east – both presenting great complexity for the council as a planning authority – although also very different. Fountainbridge is a brownfield site with, so far, a fairly productive engagement between community and developer, while Craighouse is a very precious green site with historic buildings and a community relationship with developers where trust has really collapsed.

Into that mix, throw in, in the middle of the area, Slateford Yard, which was granted permission by The Scottish Reporter, on appeal in 2012 and is only now looking to begin on site. The developers are building a large student block in the midst of historic colony homes.

So, it is hardly surprising that, in the Chesser area, the old Fruitmarket site has been, so far, a bit under the radar. It has neither the scale of Fountainbridge, nor the community disquiet of Craighouse or Slateford Yard. But it is an important site all the same.

Situated across Chesser Avenue from the Corn Exchange it was historically the site of a fruit market (hence the name) and then of supermarkets – most recently, ASDA, before the US giant upped sticks and built a much larger store across the road about ten years ago. While the property bubble had not yet burst, it was then bought by a house developer which put

forward plans for a very high density development on the site, before going under. The land then reverted to funder RBS, which owns it under its property wing, West Register.

So the land has lain increasingly derelict for 10 years now. Local people want to see it developed, as indeed do I, as one of the three local councillors. In the context of a draft Edinburgh Local Development Plan which (unacceptably, in my view) identifies a lot of green and peripheral sites as suitable for development, the city really needs to work the brownfield land within the city as hard as it can. So, personally, I'd really like to see the site focused largely on housing, especially affordable housing.

That is not where we are though. The debt on the land being so high, the owner has argued that it is uneconomic to develop only for housing and that a large retail chunk is need to make it viable. Against officers' recommendations, the planning committee in the previous administration granted planning permission in principle in late 2011 for a mixed development comprising homes and a supermarket – subsequently lined up as Morrisons. Local residents presented a petition in support of that proposal.

Although not a councillor at the time I expressed surprise at that decision. With an ASDA across the road and two Sainsburys within walking distance in either direction, I could not see how a fourth supermarket could be viable, leaving aside its impact on smaller shops. And so it has seemed, with Morrisons now pulling out, leaving the developer to seek to recast the proposal as eight smaller retail units, but using the same space and within the same conditions as the existing planning permission.

To repeat – my own view is that the area needs affordable homes more than it needs shops, or at least not the kind of bland corporate shops that are likely to afford the rents on offer. For all that, the lynchpin of the Fruitmarket site is

argued to be retail, it is ironically the housing element which is now most advanced, with Dunedin-Canmore Housing Association having lined up funding to build up to two-thirds of the projected homes for social housing or mid market rents. It is the retail element which now looks more in the balance. However, I recognise that the developer is quite entitled to put forward plans within the consent which the previous planning committee granted.

Given that the proposals have evolved so much, I agreed to chair a meeting on 25 June on behalf of Hutchison-Chesser Community Council to ensure that local residents were kept up to date with what is planned. When planning permission in principle was sought two years ago a modest 16 people attended the drop-in sessions so it was good to see around 70 people come to the meeting in St Cuthbert's Primary School in June.

It is clear, from that meeting, that it would be premature to conclude that there is a settled local view on the use of the site. And it is quite hard to communicate that the land already has a broad planning consent when what people perceive, quite understandably, is a dramatic change in the retail mix proposed; and hence the possible impact from development being quite different. Most, if not all, residents want to see the site developed and almost any land use will result in short-term impacts from construction and longer term impacts on local services and traffic.

For example, residents raised quite reasonable concerns about pressure on Balgreen Primary School which already is having to add capacity to cope with rising rolls; and about traffic flows on Chesser Avenue which is already problematic. If the retail mix were increased so too would traffic pressures, while, if the number of homes were increased, further questions would be begged about how the school will cope.

In other words there is no form of development that will not have an impact. The questions are more to do with how well the

impacts have been assessed, what can be done to deal with them, and how well the detailed conditions set by the planning department will be followed. The next stage, which is the developer submitting greater detail on the proposed scheme, is expected over the summer months, but that is really in the developers' hands as the planning consent has a shelf-life of another two years.

At the moment, it is best to assume that the development will proceed within the scope of the planning consent that has been granted. That, after all, is what the developer is entitled to do. Should the retail equation not stack up I would be delighted to see a revised plan with a greater balance towards housing, plus opportunities for community space and some open space and possibly even scope for investment in community heating. But these are all in a possible future.

It seems that, as in other major planning applications in the area, there is no such thing as plain sailing. I cannot help but feel that a more engaged, community-focused form of planning would be a great boon; but we are a long way from that, as yet.

The planning permission which Gavin writes about can be [viewed here on the Council website.](#)

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