

Gordon Munro on those fighting a good fight for Leith

Gordon Munro is Labour councillor for Leith. Here he shares his thoughts on planning matters in Leith.



The capriciousness of the Town Planning Department in Edinburgh is a matter of public record as well as heated public debate but three recent applications in Leith show how little they took on board when Sir Terry Farrell was the Design Champion for Edinburgh. Each also highlights an ivory tower paternalistic approach that takes no account of the real world.



Port of Leith Housing Association (POLHA) received permission to build 57 homes for rent and mid-market rent in Constitution Street opposite the casino, work commencing late 2018. The planners recommended refusal of the application and a split vote on the council's Planning Committee agreed with the

planner's recommendation. POLHA appealed this decision and won. The planners had based their refusal on air quality standards from the monitoring station on Salamander Street.

I pointed out that if air quality was an issue why were the flats at Salamander Court (opposite the monitoring station) built. The planned development is on the periphery of this zone and therefore any impact would be diluted by distance and weather and it appears that this information along with site specific data and measures such as the PassivHaus standards of the development were sufficient to win the appeal – *Planners @ Leith 1*.

The second application was the extension of the Malt and Hops, adding a floating pontoon on the Shore opposite the premises. This is one of Leith's best pubs, but the proposal would have impaired one of the key Water of Leith views on a stretch that is a real draw for tourists and photographers. Amazingly the planners recommended approval despite objections from the Friends of Water of Leith, the local community Council and local councillors.

Part of the animus for some of the objectors was the fear that the entire waterway would soon be awash with boats of commerce, obscuring the beauty of this part of Leith. When it went to committee they rejected the planner's recommendations, accepting the key points as well as the advice of transport officers citing concerns about this use creating hazards for the nearby road. The applicant appealed and the appeal was rejected. The water will remain open space for the foreseeable future assisting the aims of those working to make Leith a tourist attraction in its own right – *Planners @ Leith 2*.

The third application was sought by Cala Homes, who wished to build a mix of housing and small-scale commercial development on the vacant site opposite Ocean Terminal. (Cala like Leith. Their Albert Dock Development sold very quickly, convincing them to buy the old Post Office site on Brunswick Road – also

sold out.) The planners objected saying there were 'insufficient commercial units and office spaces'. Arrant nonsense based on the out of date Local Development Plan.

It also did not reflect reality, the flats at Salamander Court have commercial units at ground level, which have had a variety of intermittent uses (or lain empty) since being built. As for office space, there is a whole floor of the Sir Terry Farrell designed Ocean Point building that has not been let since it opened 16 years ago. There. Is. No. Demand.

In my presentation to committee I brought up the lack of demand for the two key points in the planners case for rejection. I also referred to the council's policy on small artisanal workspace – a key point in the *Leith Blueprint* produced by Leith Creative. Here was a real opportunity to have artisans working and selling their wares whilst tempting some of the 350,000 visitors to Royal Yacht Britannia to linger longer in Leith.

The other point made to committee was this space has been derelict for some time and other opportunities present themselves for development here; a bespoke home for Leith Sea Cadets, Victoria Dock berthing the SS Explorer, making it a counter point attraction to the royal yacht?

On the day the case against the planners was put by yours truly and Adam McVey; Keith Anderson on behalf of POLHA and Leith Chamber of Commerce; Leith Harbour and Newhaven Community Council; Ocean Terminal pointed out that a different type of commercial space was needed here and a local resident, who originally objected, spoke in favour saying the developer had worked extensively with local residents to change the design to one they could "live with."

The committee took these into account and unanimously supported rejecting the planner's recommendations. Approving the plan to build 388 homes – including 97 affordable by POLHA

– along with 29 commercial units suitable for a variety of small businesses – *Planners @ Leith 3*.

These results, away from home in the City Chambers, will hopefully result in a better understanding of Leith by the planning department. One of the key points made in that Leith Blueprint was the need to “Put the people at the heart of all planning decisions.”

Unlike the patrician approach (which saw Grampian and Cairngorm high rise flats built and demolished within 35 years.) One participant suggested we “...find ways and places to connect and live well together not just beside each other.” Any planner worth their qualifications would take that remark on board and look at Leith holistically.

We will, all of us, take it to extra time to get the result we want for Leith.

This article appeared first in [The Leith Magazine](#) and is reproduced with permission here.