

Royal High to go on the open market

by Joseph Anderson Local Democracy Reporter

The former Royal High School building is to go back on the market as The City of Edinburgh Council has ended a long lease with developers.

The council's Finance & Resources Committee met in private on Thursday to decide to either continue with the current lease, take back complete control of the building, grant a lease to the music school backers or put the property up for a new lease.

The A-listed neoclassical landmark, built in 1829 by Thomas Hamilton, has been lying largely empty since the school relocated in 1968. The only use it has been put to in recent years is to store the ballot boxes used at elections.

It was previously proposed as a home for The Scottish Parliament or a new national photography centre, before the council launched a competition seeking proposals for a hotel redevelopment in 2009.

The winners of the competition, Edinburgh-based Duddingston House Properties, were then granted a 125-year lease of the building, with the council ultimately retaining ownership, and the developers have been trying to gain planning approval for

various hotel schemes ever since.

Now, the council has decided to end the lease with Duddingston House Properties, and put the property back on the market.

Following a lengthy discussion behind closed doors, councillors ultimately decided to market the property in the hopes of attaining as much value for money as possible for the local authority, as of course they are bound to do adhering to Best Value principles.

The severing of the contract with the developers will provide hope for The Royal High School Preservation Trust, which wants to relocate St Mary's Music School from its current West End Home to the site.

However, that project is by no means guaranteed as the backers, the Dunard Fund, will have to compete on the open market for the lease.

In 2015, plans for a £75m luxury hotel, in partnership with property developers Urbanist Hotels, were narrowly rejected during an all-day meeting of the council's planning committee, following outcry from conservationists and heritage groups.

The plans would have allowed two six-storey wings to be built on either side of the former Royal High School building, and attracted objections from Historic Scotland, the Cockburn Association, the Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland and over 1,700 members of the public. If they had not included the wings it is highly likely the hotel permission would have been granted.

In 2016, The Royal High School Preservation Trust obtained planning permission from the council to relocate St Mary's Music School to the site, with backing from the Dunard Fund and American philanthropist Carol Grigor, but Duddingston House Properties said it has sole rights to the building until 2022.

When their planning application was rejected, Duddingston House Properties and Urbanist Hotels appealed the decision to The Scottish Government, but this appeal was delayed as the developers unveiled new, scaled-back proposals for the site, which were submitted to the council for consideration.

The new proposals suggested the wings – which were previously the source of strong criticism from heritage watchdogs – would be smaller and set further back from the road, opening up views blocked off under the old scheme.

The proposed western extension was particularly reduced in height compared to the previous plans.

This time, over 3,000 members of the public objected to the plans, which were rejected by the council in August 2017.

The rejection of the revised plans restarted the appeal to the Scottish Government, and in October of last year the plans were rejected by the government's Planning and Environmental Appeals Division.

The deputations to Thursday's Finance & Resources Committee were all concerned with the former school building. You can read them below:



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