

Plans to create George Street restaurant refused

Plans to turn the Paperchase stationery store on George Street into a restaurant have been narrowly refused by councillors amid fears over a loss of retail units on one of the capital's main shopping streets.

Proposals for a change of use at the B-listed 77A George Street were first rejected in September as officers argued that further "erosion of retail" in this section of the city centre would have a "detrimental impact upon the vitality of the surrounding area".

The City of Edinburgh Council's Planning Local Review Body met to discuss the application on Wednesday after a planning appeal was lodged.

Committee members were split over whether to overturn officers' original decision, with some eager to abide by planning regulations which stipulate no more than a third of businesses in the 'block', consisting of 14 units, should be "in non-shop use".

Others, however, were more sympathetic to the applicant and highlighted financial hardship faced by businesses during the pandemic which has driven a number of retailers out of the city centre as their focus has moved online.

A report urged councillors to uphold the refusal and stated: "The proposed change of use from a class 1 (retail) to a class 3 (restaurant) would be unacceptable in that not only would it result in the further loss of retail in the defined area, but it would also not comply with policy CC 3 as over one third of the businesses would be in non-shop use."

"It added that contributions of £38,276 towards Edinburgh Trams would be required from the applicant if plans were approved."

A letter of support sent by Essential Edinburgh, which manages the city centre Business Improvement District (BID), called for more flexibility from the council in its decision making on proposals like these.

The organisation's Chief Executive Roddy Smith wrote: "No one wants to see vacant units on George Street, and we would like to see high quality operators enter the vicinity."

"As the city centre recovers from the pandemic, we must look to continue to support new operators wishing to locate in the city centre."

It was noted by the applicants, Aegon Asset Management, that there's currently a 20 per cent vacancy rate for units on George Street.

Committee convenor Cllr Denis Dixon said: "This is a very difficult one indeed."

"We're all very familiar with George Street and the character of the street. If we're honest, I suppose, an additional restaurant wouldn't be overly detrimental to the street."

Cllr Dixon admitted it's "very hard" to comply with the council's existing retail policy, last reviewed at the start of 2020 prior to the pandemic.

He added: "But if we stick strictly to the policies we'll then

have to uphold officers' recommendations."

Councillor Hal Osler, Lib Dems, said: "We all have an enormous amount of sympathy for the applicant and it would be lovely to have a vibrant street on George Street.

"We've had other applications in front of us from places like Frederick Street where there's been a change and we've refused it. I think as it stands, because we have guidance and it has been reviewed recently, much that we might feel sympathy and so on, we have no choice but to stick to our guidance."

Supporting a move to grant the change of use, Conservative councillor Max Mitchell said: "I don't think it's necessarily correct to say this becomes a restaurant and we lose a shop forever because an application could come along again to change the use later on.

"I think the city centre is suffering greatly and I appreciate that the loss of another retail unit could have an implication but ultimately there are successful restaurants that could be added to here.

"The city centre is struggling but I think restaurants are still destinations in the way that some retail units are not."

Green councillor Chas Booth said he could see "strong arguments on both sides" but also supported reversing the refusal.

He added: "I think we're all aware that the pandemic has added to the effect that was already existing of a move of retail towards online and I think this application does have an opportunity to add to the vitality of George Street, to ensure that we don't get yet another vacant unit."

But Cllr Maureen Child said such a move would be "a backward step".

"Retail in George Street is the right way forward," the Labour

councillor said. "In theory, yes it could come back into retail use but much more likely it will remain a restaurant forevermore."

Members voted 3 votes to 2 in favour of upholding officers' original decision to refuse permission.

Cllr Mitchell said after the meeting: "What Councillor Booth and I were both getting at is the city centre has had a particularly terrible time over the past couple of years compared to local town centres, which whether being a restaurant or a retail unit, have weathered the last couple of years pretty well."

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter

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