

# **Councillor joins opposition to student housing development at old Tynecastle High School**

**Labour councillor Ross McKenzie has told developers of the old Tynecastle High School the local community wants “social housing, not student housing” amid growing opposition to plans.**

The newly elected councillor called on fellow Sighthill/Gorgie ward councillors to publicly object to proposals for new purpose built student accommodation (PBSA) on the McLeod Street site when they go before the planning committee later this year.

He said the overprovision of student housing in the area was the “biggest issue on the doorstep” in the run up to the local election and criticised S1 Developments, which is behind the project, for ‘repeatedly lobbying’ councillors but not fully engaging with the local community.



Cllr Ross McKenzie. Photo: © 2022, Martin P. McAdam  
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But the Edinburgh-based developer argued planning constraints associated with the site mean delivering private or social housing is not possible – and said the 468 student beds would ‘free up 170 local properties for family homes’.

It comes after protesters turned up to a tour of the derelict school given to Cllr McKenzie and members of the local community council this week.

Members of Living Rent Gorgie/Dalry attended the site inspection to challenge S1 Development over a ‘lack of community involvement’ and highlight that, as the area with the fourth highest number of student beds in Scotland, more BPSA ‘is not wanted locally’.

Ruaraidh Dempster, local Living Rent member, said: “Everyone I’ve spoken to in Gorgie-Dalry is absolutely dead set against this proposal. Again and again, the community has objected to and stood against this proposal and the broad support Living

Rent has garnered on this issue is testament to that.

“Students, just like anyone else, need genuinely affordable homes that are energy efficient – not cramped, over expensive student accommodation that caters more to the needs of greedy property developers rather than residents.”

If given the go ahead by the council’s planning committee in August, the main B-listed building, which served as the high school for nearly 100 years before staff and pupils relocated across the road in 2009, would be retained and ‘sensitively refurbished’ to make way for student accommodation, according to plans.

Two new blocks would be built in a ‘car free environment with generous outdoor amenity space’ with the construction of a ‘community facility’ and urban farm to be operated by LOVE Gorgie Farm also proposed on the site.

S1 Development said there are a number of factors impacting its ability to “create high-quality private or social housing”.

A spokesperson for the developer said: “The constraints at Tynecastle include a Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Consultation Zone to the western boundary, noise and air quality issues from surrounding uses, and a protected sewer route through the middle of the site.

“The noise issues, in particular, mean that no individual private external gardens or balconies can be provided to residential units on the perimeter of the site. The noise issues also require closed window attenuation and mechanical ventilation to all internal rooms in order to provide the requisite level of amenity for planning approval.”

They explained the the communal nature of student housing “allows us to mitigate the site constraints to a greater degree than a private residential scheme”.

And they added: “An independent economic report, which can be viewed alongside the planning application on the City of Edinburgh Council website, highlights numerous positive socio-economic impacts. These included job creation and associated spending from the development, increased spending from the student population and up to 170 properties freed up for family homes.

“As a company we think it makes more sense to provide a high-quality and exemplar student housing scheme than to provide a compromised private residential scheme with low levels of private amenity.”



Last year Gorgie and Dalry Community Council (GDCC) formally objected to the plans to reflect the “overwhelming opposition of local residents”. A survey carried out by the group found 87 per cent of 166 respondents in the area were against the development going ahead.

They argued the local community are “in dire need of social and affordable homes being built in our area” and raised concerns that 545 students moving in would lead to a “loss of a balanced community”.

This week, GDCC chair Joan Gordon said that despite the arguments about planning constraints made by developers, the objection would not be withdrawn “as we believe the local community is still against this proposal and that even with current building standards a design offering residential flats would be possible”.

She admitted the development “does offer some great amenities, does safeguard a historic building and is a far better design than other student accommodation that we have seen elsewhere”.

Ms Gordon added: “We do think that this site needs to be developed otherwise it will further decay, this was clearly shown to us during the site visit as its already in a very bad shape. We are in favour of mixed communities where students can afford to live alongside working people and families. We don’t believe Purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) solves any issues of housing, as students still prefer to live in the traditional housing stock and PBSA are often very expensive.

“If this site had a mix of residential and student accommodation, it is highly likely that we would support it. If this is built alongside the other PBSA at Westfield the percentage of the population in these PBSA’s will be 14% with the student population being 29%, there has been a massive rise since 2011 and the last population data we have.”



The group's objection, submitted in October, also noted that an online consultation on plans organised by S1 Development was "poor and not very accessible", stating it was "very short in length and on one day".

They added that members of Living Rent Gorgie Dalry were ignored and "excluded from any consultations".

Cllr McKenzie was also critical of the level of engagement between the developer and local residents. He said shortly after being elected last month he was "contacted repeatedly by a lobbyist acting on behalf of the developers".

"This desperation to engage with councillors stands in contrast to the approach they have taken with the people of Gorgie as the community expressed concern about the proposal for student housing," he added.

"They have refused to meet with the local Living Rent branch and have failed to engage with the points raised in the community council's survey.

"Overprovision of student housing was the biggest issue on the

doorstep during the election campaign. I hope that all four Sighthill/Gorgie councillors will publicly oppose this development before it comes to the planning committee in August. Gorgie has spoken, and people want social housing, not student housing. It's time for councillors to ignore the property lobby and listen to their constituents."

Dan Heap, Green group councillor in the same ward, confirmed this week he is against the proposals being granted planning permission.

He said: "Whilst having several features, such as an urban farm, the proposed development delivers no social or affordable housing on a site that could accommodate this."



SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon with Cllr Catherine Fullerton at a pre-election rally in Portobello PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter

But Denis Dixon, SNP councillor for Sighthill/Gorgie, is backing the bid, saying the redevelopment will "bring the building back into use after many years of lying empty".

He said: "I have visited the site several times in the past, the most recent visit being just before the elections in May. I am aware of the restrictions in terms of building anything in that space.

"Because it backs onto the distillery and chemical plant it has never been appropriate to build housing on the whole of the site. Therefore, the developer's preferred option is student accommodation.

"The Old Tynecastle school building is falling into serious disrepair and needs saving urgently. I feel the developer's proposals will do this."

His SNP colleague and fellow ward councillor Cathy Fullerton was approached for comment but has not confirmed what stance she will take ahead of the vote in August. Commenting on the plans last year, she said the development would give a boost to local shops and businesses whilst recognising it may not be acceptable due its proximity to new Westfield student accommodation being built nearby.

Cllr Fullerton added: "I am also aware of local opposition to more student accommodation and the view that affordable homes are what is required which must be given some weight."

Members of the public can comment on the proposals via the council's planning portal until Friday, 1 July.

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter

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