

Plans for student flats refused

Proposals to create new student flats on the site of a former Edinburgh high school have been refused as councillors called on developers to draw up plans for residential housing instead.

The surprise verdict was reached on Wednesday despite officers recommending that the planning sub-committee give them the go-ahead, with members raising concerns about industrial noise and odours from a neighbouring whisky distillery.

A local councillor said it was the “right decision for the community” after residents in Gorgie and Dalry objected over a lack of affordable housing and fears about an excessive concentration of students in the area.

A separate application for a community garden run by LOVE Gorgie Farm, however, was approved and is expected to be incorporated into revised plans.

The Edinburgh-based S1 Developments first lodged plans last year to partially demolish and redevelop the old Tynecastle High building and build new flats at Mcleod Street site to accommodate 468 students.

As well as the 233 objections from the public, the council’s environmental protection team said plans should be refused, arguing that industrial noise from the North British Distillery which lies next to the site would significantly

impact on living conditions. In addition, councillors said odours coming from the distillery would lead to a poor level of amenity.

Developers said it is always their “first choice” to build permanent housing rather than purpose built student accommodation (PBSA), but added the “requisite level of amenity” couldn’t be met for residential homes at the former school site as gardens or balconies couldn’t be provided.

They argued this loss of amenity would be “offset” by communal spaces including large breakout spaces facing onto a central landscaped area.

However, the report from environmental protection said there is “no difference between the amenity standards required for residential and student residential developments”.

Despite this, planning officers backed the application and said in a report: “On balance the retention of a listed building on a constrained site through the proposed student scheme is considered to be a pragmatic approach.”

Green councillor Chas Booth said: “On the one hand environmental health has said there’s no distinction in terms of the noise between whether it’s student housing or mainstream housing and yet the conclusion we have reached in terms of planning is that there is a distinction.”

Luke McClelland from S1 Developments said: “It’s not the case that we’re trying to relax the requirements for students, it’s more that the communal way of living is better suited to this site because we can concentrate the amenity and all the shared amenity at the centre where it’s sheltered.”

Alex McKendrick from Gorgie and Dalry Community Council urged the committee to refuse permission.

He said: "The student population in Gorgie and Dalry in 2011 stood at around 20 per cent. We have no idea what the current numbers are because it's been so many years and it's guess work.

"1,138 new beds have been built since 2011 in our community council area. If you include areas just outside of our boundary such as Fountainbridge, that's around 3,737. This is a rise in student numbers locally of about 100 per cent.

"The applicant says that students are not likely to stick around, even throughout the year. This will form a transient community hollowed out twice a year during holiday breaks with a guaranteed yearly rotating population.

"There's no proof that providing these beds will remove students from local flats and HMOs – rather we expect that even larger numbers of first year students who will then wish to find their own flat."

Local campaigner Aditi Jehangir from Living Rent Gorgie Dalry said: "The environmental report states that this site is not suitable for any accommodation, residential or otherwise.

"Over the past decade planning permission has been obtained for over 1,000 student units in Gorgie Dalry, during that same period the local population has doubled but only around 100 affordable homes have been built.

"There's anger and frustration around this pattern of construction. People are rightly angry at the failure to provide affordable housing in the area."

She told councillors it was "time to start listening to our community," adding: "If this site is unsafe for housing then it's unsafe for student housing. If it's safe for housing then the development should include residential housing."

Cllr Booth admitted there was "a lot of merit" in the

application and urged the applicants to come forward with proposals that deliver housing on the site. He suggested this would receive a “much more favourable outcome”.

Members refused planning permission for the student flats but approved the community garden.

Ward councillor for Sighthill/Gorgie Ross McKenzie said following the meeting: “The committee came to right decision – the right decision for the community. I hope that the developer will return with an application that genuinely seeks to make a contribution to addressing Edinburgh’s housing crisis.”

Ms Jehangir added: “Living Rent Gorgie Dalry branch are extremely pleased with the decision. We have been campaigning against this development for years and it is clear that the community does not support more PBSA in our area. We believe that PBSA is bad for students and bad for local residents.

“We look forward to a proposal being brought forward that will make appropriate use of the site and will address rather than exacerbate the inequalities in Edinburgh’s housing provision.”

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter

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