

Beer garden at Waverley Market may have to close

A popular Edinburgh city centre beer garden faces permanent closure after the council rejected a bid for it to continue operating.

The 'Festival Village' has occupied Waverley Market's rooftop plaza on and off for the past five years but could soon have to clear out over concerns about its "negative" impact on the area.

Pop-up bars, food stalls and seating areas have dominated the space at the east end of Princes Street, mainly during summer and Christmas festival seasons, since temporary planning permission was first granted in 2017.

A application for a three-year extension was thrown out as council planners said the Village "fails to preserve" the character and appearance of the city centre.

The arrival of Festival Village has transformed the plaza into a popular party place in the heart of the capital, where large groups can turn up without a booking, sample food and drink from local businesses and enjoy live music courtesy of local artists.

Smugglers Spirits and Secret Garden Gin are among the beer garden's traders, with street food from Pizza Geeks, Say Cheese and Butcher Boy.

Moorgarth Group, which runs Edinburgh's Festival Village alongside one in Glasgow, said in plans seeking renewal of

consent for the temporary structures that “significant economic benefits” have been delivered by the Village “to the city as a whole” with 425 people employed there in 2021/22.

The statement continued: “The Village also provides an important opportunity for existing Mall tenants to showcase their products on the rooftop and to draw people into the Mall itself, boosting their sales as well as those of others in the Mall.

“It has operated for five years without receiving any complaints from neighbouring businesses or residents.

“In addition, the Festival Village employs only local musical performers, providing a unique opportunity for young and aspiring acoustic acts to showcase their talent to a worldwide audience, thereby offering cultural benefits to the city.”

The council originally gave it the go-ahead for two years in 2017 – but due to The Scottish Government’s decision to relax planning rules for hospitality during Covid-19, the attraction was able to remain open beyond the expiration date during the pandemic when restrictions allowed.

Following a decision by ministers to end Holyrood’s ‘pragmatic and flexible approach’ to temporary developments in September, a bid for Festival Village to stay for another three years was lodged.

However, this has proved unsuccessful after the local authority rejected the plans on Friday. The decision could spell the end of the Village’s time on the roof of Waverley Market, formerly known as Waverley Mall, and is likely to spark speculation about what’s next for the plaza.

The council said in its letter to the applicant: “The proposal fails to preserve the character and appearance of the New and Old Towns Conservation Areas and has an adverse impact on the setting of adjacent listed buildings. As such, the overall

impact is negative.

“In addition – there is a negative impact on the Outstanding Universal Value of the Old and New Town of Edinburgh World Heritage Site. There is therefore a statutory presumption against planning permission being granted. The potential benefits of the proposal in economic terms would not justify the harm being done.”

The news was welcomed by heritage body, The Cockburn Association. Director Terry Levinthal said: “Whilst we did not support the application, we did not object to it as we were aware of a previous successful application for a roof temporary extension granted permission just over three years ago (now time barred).

“This seemed to have established the use of this site for hospitality uses. We strongly opposed the granting of consent at this time as it would disrupt the highly important views across the Waverley to the Old Town, a principle set down in the 19th century and preserved ever since until then.

“The Cockburn noted that there were very few residential properties in the near vicinity. However, we sought assurance that access along Princes Street will not be adversely impacted, and that adequate monitoring and enforcement including noise intrusion and unsocial behaviour was put in place. A more permanent, natural landscaping of the site was encouraged.

“We were therefore surprised to learn of the refusal of planning permission, but very much welcome it. It reinforces the importance of the open prospect across the Waverley Valley to the character of the World Heritage Site and the Old and New Town Conservation Areas.”

He added: “The application site is adjacent to a particularly busy and congestion section of Princes Street. Every effort

should be made to pull back the boundaries of this application to avoid further exacerbating congestion.”

The Festival Village and Moorgarth Group were contacted for comment.

by Donald Turvill

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