

Objections to two planning applications for same premises

Edinburgh residents fear they are being misled by a “Trojan horse” application for a new city centre charity hub and café, as plans have emerged for a late-night bar to open in the same location.

Confusion over two “contradictory” proposals for the vacant building on Gayfield Square have sparked hundreds of objections in response to alcohol licences sought for the premises.

Two separate applications have been made which could lead to alcohol being sold from the premises until as late as 1am seven days a week.

Those living around the square – described as a “residential enclave” by one local – say a drinking venue would lead to significant noise disturbance and increased levels of anti-social behaviour.

Plans lodged in 2021 by SAFE, a “charity for community public safety”, were granted permission, allowing a change of use of the property from storage to a food and drink and business.

Documents submitted to the council at the time said: “It is the intention that the main uses of the spaces will accommodate hot desking, a café, and an events, conference and

training space.” In the application SAFE also identified themselves as the sole owners of the land.

Earlier this year SAFE applied for a licence for 1 Gayfield Square to serve alcohol from 11am to 1am seven days a week, as well as off-sales until 10pm, with permission also sought to allow live music and wedding receptions in the venue.

It said the plan was for a “café for the local community, and events including art exhibitions, tutorials, tastings, events during the Fringe”.

But suspicion grew amongst locals over why the organisation required a late night drinking licence for its operations.

News then emerged of “an exciting new specialist rum bar” opening on Gayfield Square, sparking further concern.

Since-deleted articles published online said ‘Ruma’ would open this summer offering “a range of top rums and spirits from around the world, as well as an epic cocktail menu”.

In a recent post on social media, Steven Aitken, one of the people behind plans for Ruma, said he and Jamie Shields, who runs Summerhall Drinks Lab were hoping to open the new venue “sometime in August”.

A bid – separate to the one lodged by SAFE – has been lodged by Mr Shields for a temporary, or “occasional”, alcohol licence at 1 Gayfield Square for the period August 1 to September 11, operating Wednesdays to Sundays from 5pm to 1am with a noon opening on Saturdays.

His application described a “ground floor café/bar with capacity for 60 people” including a “training and event space, and office area”.

It is understood the council has received hundreds of objections in response to the provisional and occasional licences – both of which are yet to be determined.

Gayfield Square resident Jonathan Ungar, said: "We are very concerned by the misleading nature of the application, presented as "a café plus a space for exhibition and events" but with a very different set of activities hidden in an addendum to the application. And we question the appropriateness of the applicant: a charity whose purposes are completely at odds with the running of a licensed entertainment venue.

"Gayfield Square is a unique location: a residential enclave, a haven of tranquillity in the city, maintained by residents, welcoming visitors to the gardens to sit peacefully or walk their dogs undisturbed and where families, children and senior citizens can feel safe.

"The building is not soundproofed and given its size and capacity, its use as a venue for live and recorded music would be detrimental to the health and welfare of residents as their peace would be undermined and their sleep disturbed.

"Those buying off-sales will enter the gardens, whose openness all day and night we cherish but which leaves us vulnerable. There would be shouting, urinating, broken bottles that risk injuring dogs, litter and other nuisances disturbing us.

"We believe granting this license would pose a serious risk to all who reside on and enjoy this public garden square. Alcohol transforms behaviour, removes inhibitions and desensitises consumers to the needs of others.

"It would be an aggravating risk factor here, which could undermine the peace and safety of all in a vulnerable city centre location."

Neil Gilmour, another concerned local, resident also felt the two applications had caused additional concern, and suggested it was a "'Trojan horse' application strategy adopted by the potential bar operator."

“This lacks transparency and seems to have an irreconcilable contradiction at its core,” he added. “Specifically, the basis upon which planning permission seems entirely at odds with the licence application.”

Mr Gilmour said the arrival of a bar in the “quiet historic residential square” would be “wholly inappropriate in terms of noise and nuisance, lengthy opening hours, and the potential for anti-social impact upon residents”.

He added: “This is compounded by the sheer number of bars in the nearby Leith Walk area.

“We do not expect to be treated in any special manner. We do however matter, not least because we care deeply for the square and the gardens, and this corner of Edinburgh is our home.

“The strength of our feelings both reflects how much we care for Gayfield Square and the shoddy and disrespectful way this bar application has been pursued.”

The charity – the stated aims of which are to provide support to disadvantaged people, prevent poverty and provide “training, rehabilitation support, employment opportunities and personal development opportunities” – does not appear to have a website and, according to the plans, shares an address with Edinburgh-based social enterprise and employment specialist GTS Solutions CIC.

GTS Solutions CIC said SAFE “has no interest in its property ever being used as a bar primarily driven by on and off sales of alcohol or a live music venue” and that Ruma “do not hold any rights to the use or representation of the property”.

It added that “abuse” of the building had been reported to the authorities and legal advice had been sought on the matter.

When contacted about the residents’ concerns, Mr Shields

admitted Ruma had no current claim on the site or any prior links to any other organisations involved in the property.

It said that news articles about the bar plans had been published online without its consent, and added that “the occasional licence applications were made speculatively by us as potential tenants simply to try and bridge any gap until the premises licence was granted.”

In a statement, GTS Solutions CIC said it is a tenant of the property as an agreed sublease “and we at times act as the agents” for projects run by SAFE, which it added holds the headline lease.

It said: “SAFE has applied for a licence at the premises in a standard format which is widely accepted by City of Edinburgh Council.”

An alcohol licence has been sought “to enhance the flexibility of the property and allow the supply of wine, low alcohol products and drinks associated with small corporate gatherings and launches of fundraising activities,” it said.

The organisation said it was intended the property would be used “as a showroom for its analytics CCTV and Access control products which are aimed directly at the hospitality sector” and to run “educational and vocational programmes around the topic of public safety and private security industry compliance”.

It added: “This is an addition to the café area for which planning has been granted, and Noise Impact inspections were organised at the appropriate point in the project.

“SAFE has read the objections of the residents and is entirely sympathetic to their concerns and would like to state that the concerns expressed in the objections refer to the type of use of the property that SAFE would see as being entirely incorrect and would like to set the residents minds at rest by

stating that SAFE's vision of the property does not align with any of the concerns raised by the residents."

However it said Ruma was "not a sub tenant of SAFE at 1 Gayfield Square or any other property," adding they "do not hold any rights to the use or representation of the property".

The statement continued: "They have not been given any rights to advertise the property, to represent themselves as opening a Ruma bar at the property or use the address for any form of business activities.

"SAFE is aware of the delinquent activities of Ruma and the companies and individuals behind those companies and it has reported this abuse of its property to the authorities and is currently taking legal advice on the matter.

"SAFE has no interest in its property ever being used as a bar primarily driven by on and off sales of alcohol or a live music venue."

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter.

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