

Gillespie Crescent – residents do not feel charitable

Residents of Gillespie Crescent fail to see why a development which involves the sale of charity-owned premises should make them feel at all charitable.

The development of the former Sight Scotland headquarters on Gillespie Crescent will result in much-needed funding for the charity, but in their neighbours' view it will be at their expense.

Developers S Harrison lodged plans to convert the former headquarters of Sight Scotland on Gillespie Crescent into purpose built student flats and these are, following an extension, open for comment until 8 December.

The proposal is to create 145 bedrooms with "additional amenities including a cinema/multimedia room and gym". The developer confirms there will be 100% cycle parking provision. The scheme will incorporate a green space accessible to the public, "green roofs, solar panels, air source heat pumps, a rain garden and permeable paving".

Residents object to the move, partly on the basis that there are factual inaccuracies in the application, and they have formed a constituted residents' association – **Gillespie Crescent Community and Residents' Association**. they aim to support the area around their own street including Bruntsfield

Place and the residents of Viewpoint Housing.





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Christian Traynor, a local resident and member of the association, said: “Details are missing from the developers’ two planning application submissions – which is suspicious – as they are very important being the daylight/sunlight assessment appendices.

“Additionally only a fraction of the street was informed. The lack of voice for the elderly residents in the Viewpoint sheltered housing in the Crescent is worrying.

“I cannot think that the council expects to solve the Housing Emergency by building yet another student block. Arguably this will simply bring more students to Edinburgh rather than free up housing.

“At the developers’ public meeting the proposal was five storeys high. Afterwards we realised their drawings depicted six storeys, artfully obscured to obfuscate this fact. It looks like they knowingly gave us false information.

“The proposals have now been amended to five storeys apparently in response to residents’ comments. But this is disingenuous and is what we have found the standard ruse which was used at Eyre Place Lane in Canonmills, and at the St Joseph’s Convent development in Gilmore Place. The developers always propose an extra floor, knowing the height will be objected to, so they can later remove it for it to appear as if they are being considerate to neighbours.

“The charity’s need for money cannot be used as a justification for demolishing an historic building in a conservation area, to the detriment of this community for the foreseeable future.”

Mr Traynor also explained to us that demolition in this area had been refused in 2020 and documents prove opposition from bodies such as Historic Environment Scotland.

And he also claims that older residents in the street are being left out. He said: “Many elderly and disabled residents of the sheltered housing, are effectively excluded from the process and from having a voice, because many are not tech-savvy and have many pressing challenges in day-to-day life. They are reporting to neighbours that their management are dismissing the proposals and avoiding comment. This is upsetting given that they will be direct neighbours to any new development and it will hugely affect their well-being and amenity. We are spending much volunteering time trying to support these people to have a voice.

“The proposals include an outside communal area which is being framed as a throughway for elderly residents and an area to encourage socialisation of the surrounding community. In reality, for sheltered housing residents to use this they will have to cross the road at its busy mouth rather than the safe crossing half-way down the quiet road.”

Former councillor Alasdair Rankin, who is a local resident,

said: "The developer is talking of building in a conservation area, and the style of the building is not at all sympathetic with that. But firstly they are talking about demolishing a perfectly functional 1930s stone-built building for which there could be alternative uses. We are trying to explore some ideas about that at the moment. Perhaps the council would like to acquire the building, but maybe they will say they don't have the money to buy it, or they don't need it. If we can do something to stop the demolition that would be our desired first step.

"There is also the question of some existing flats at ground floor, first floor and second floor level which might be overlooked by any new development – and in my view they have a right to privacy. The developers also plan to build right at the front of the site which makes that problem more of an issue."

Tollcross Community Council object to the demolition of the existing building – which was rejected by the council in 2020. A spokesperson for the community council said: "The building is a good example of a high-quality interwar stone building which retains its original character and interest. It is sound and being of stone and slate fits in to the surrounding buildings and it makes a positive contribution to the character of the surrounding area. It is a local landmark and has a long history in the area."

The developers S Harrison claim that the number of students in Edinburgh rose by more than a quarter in the five years between 2016/17 and 2021/22. They also claim that demand for student accommodation outstrips supply. But this is a contentious claim in the view of the community council who point to what the Reporter said in a decision from 2021 (PPA 230-2323) where the difficulty in assessing true numbers is acknowledged. The Reporter wrote: *'Summing up on the issue of the concentration of students in this locality, I conclude that the evidence indicates that it is (or will be if all*

permitted developments are built) approaching the 50% threshold contained in the council's student housing guidance.'

The spokesperson said: "We believe that this, at, least, validates our contention that the percentage of students is higher than described by the appellant. Local feelings are strong with regard to the changing demography of our locality. This is about the continuing increase in the percentage of the population which are transient. Student numbers are increasing rapidly but are not the only transient population. In addition to students, we should also consider short term residents of hotels, bed and breakfast establishments and short term let properties."

In the 13-year period between 2010 and 2023 Edinburgh Council has granted planning consent for 14,884 beds in Edinburgh, but none of these was in the Morningside Ward.

A spokesperson for S Harrison Developments said earlier: "We are in a housing crisis, with a need for all types of housing. Demand for student accommodation greatly outstrips supply, and this is placing significant pressure on traditional family housing stock, with students occupying homes that would in many cases have previously been occupied by families.

"This proposed development on a brownfield site, if approved, will respond to this increasing demand, housing students in a central location with easy access by active travel and public transport to universities and delivering significant investment into the local community."

Davina Shiell, Director of Marketing, Communications and Engagement for Sight Scotland said when the plans were announced: "The funds released by the sale of the site, if consented, will enable us to further expand our reach, and support even more people living with visual impairments within existing services such as the Royal Blind School in Edinburgh.

“It will also allow us to provide new future services for the city, as well as expanding our ability to fund medical research to tackle the root causes of sight loss.”

