

Student flats rejected over fears they would 'become an island' if flooded

Plans for an 87-room block on Westfield Road were rejected by Councillors, with concerns over flood risks.

Councillors refused the developers' bid to bulldoze the Murrayfield Sports Bar and replace it with flats, with one raising concerns over disabled students living on the ground floor being "abandoned" if evacuation plans failed.

Despite objections from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) and the local authority's own flooding experts, planners backed the application, saying on balance it was "compliant with the development plan".

The Westfield Road site was confirmed as being at risk of flooding "from a 1 in 200-year event in the future", with the likelihood increased with climate change impacts factored in.

One councillor pointed out the frequency quoted was not exact and the most recent such event was only last year.

While the 87-room block was thrown out at the development-management sub-committee on Wednesday February 28, the developers now have the option to appeal to the Scottish Government.

Gorgie-Dalry Community Council, which was among 80 objectors, said the development would cause an "excessive level of student population in the local area" which was disputed by planners.

SEPA's objection was made "on the grounds of flood risk from the Water of Leith which they expect to put people or property

at risk of flooding". Officers said if a serious flood occurred it would block safe access to the building which "in effect would become an island".

Councillor Chas Booth said: "I think there is something fairly wrong if we're effectively saying we're relying on something that can't be controlled by planning, which is there will be an evacuation plan. We can't control that.

"We're sort of basically trusting them to not abandon the disabled users who will be on the lower floors – admittedly not at immediate flood risk, but still we need to be able to have confidence they can get out. Our own flood prevention officers don't have that confidence and I'm not sure that we should either."

A report said: "While the front of house parts of the building would flood, accommodation at the ground floor and upper levels would not flood due to mitigation in the form of higher ground floor levels."

Supporting the application, Councillor Fiona Bennett said the accommodation "could be a place of safety" for others in the area in the event of extreme flooding for which there would be prior warning.

Taking the same position, Councillor Amy McNeese-Mechan said: "I do have trust in our emergency services. I think actually the people in this building might be safer than people living in the tenements immediately opposite who won't have any of these [flood] mitigation measures put into place."

Councillor Jo Mowat said: "If there was that one in 200 year event actually those occupants would be safe while the flood waters came and went.

"That tends to be quite a quick process."

However, Councillor Neil Gardiner pointed out it was "very rare" for flood officers not to be on the same page as planners.

He said: "The residents have to stay in their rooms in a flood event and I think that would be quite concerning if I was locked in my room, particularly if I was in a wheelchair, unable to get into other rooms – there's no common space on

the ground flood that's not flooding and I don't think we should be putting the residents through that."

The site could be developed but this particular design doesn't really deal with the flood issue properly."

The application was rejected by eight votes to three.

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter



Plans for student accommodation on Westfield Road