

Fears for future of 'decaying' Art Deco cinema

Council to examine options for the empty George cinema building in Portobello, amid fears it could be "demolished by default"

City councillors called for urgent action to secure the future of Portobello's George Cinema – but stopped short of pushing for enforcement action to ensure remedial works are carried out.

Having sat empty for eight years, there have been two failed attempts to demolish the dilapidated Bath Street building to make way for flats, while a recent move by owners, Buckley Building UK Ltd, to remove its listed status was also refused by Historic Environment Scotland (HES) and then the Scottish Government on appeal.

A bid to purchase it by community group Friends of the George, who want to see it re-opened as a 'cinema and cultural venue', was turned down.

There are growing concerns the clock is ticking to ensure the iconic structure is not lost forever.

Edinburgh East MP Tommy Sheppard said many locals were now worried it could "go past the point where it could be renovated and ending up being demolished by default".

Meanwhile a resident who lives directly next door to the former movie theatre and bingo hall said he "fully expects it will go on fire at some point".

The issue was raised at a full council meeting on Thursday, March 21, by local SNP councillor Kate Campbell, who said "mounds of earth" recently piled up against the outside walls

“could speed up the decay of the building while it’s left derelict”.

She added: “We need the council to urgently look at what enforcement action it can take, and agree a way forward that saves this wonderful building and preserves it for the future.”

Her motion calling for a report which “assesses the case for enforcement action, the condition of the building and the appropriate next steps in order to secure the future of the building” was amended by the Labour administration to instead ask for planning and building standards officers to “investigate the potential of carrying out an assessment of the building as soon as possible”.

Planning convener James Dalgleish said it should be left to planning officers to decide whether issuing an enforcement notice – which would require the owner to take specific measures to address safety concerns – would be the best way to proceed.

He said: “All councillors want to see the George Cinema back in use in some form. What we are simply debating today is the process of how to get there.”

Neil Gardiner, SNP, said: “We’re watching our heritage rot away with our very eyes... we should do what we can to preserve it.”

Conservative councillor for Portobello Tim Jones said officers have “met the owners recently,” adding: “I can assure you they are taking active steps to ensure the building is safe which I think will allay some of the fears of residents who live in the street.

“I met with planning officers yesterday and have they have promised to provide a progress statement very shortly and again this is important we get regular updates.

“We really must allow officers to follow the process and we must allow them to provide what are the real options for this building.”

‘I don’t see where the solution lies’

Gary Horne, who lives directly beside The George, said: “I

fully expect it will go on fire at some point.

"This happens all the time – it becomes impossible to get plans to work and it becomes no longer feasible to get something."

Mr Horne, who works as a planning officer, said: "The powers councils have are fairly toothless unless they do a compulsory purchase and that will cost far too much money. I don't see where the solution lies, I don't know what's inside the building."

He added: "Everything's salvageable, it's about how deep are your pockets. The guy who owns it told me it would cost upwards of £5 million to renovate it.

"I'm not in favour of demolishing heritage, but even from a planning perspective I don't see the great appeal; of course it's got an Art Deco facade but the rest of it's a bit of an eyesore so it's certainly not contributing to the conservation area here."

After the meeting Cllr Campbell said: "I'm glad we got a motion passed highlighting the desperate need for enforcement action to save this precious building which means so much to the community.

"But I am really sad that Labour and the Tories voted together to water down the wording, ultimately leaving the decision on enforcement completely up in the air. Local people are really worried that the building is at risk, and getting the council to take action is urgent."

Mr Sheppard added: "Local people are understandably concerned about the George falling into dilapidation – going past the point where it could be renovated and ending up being demolished by default.

"This is a listed building in a conservation area. Planning enforcement officers need a clear steer from councillors here to act as the custodian. Why Labour and the Tories weakened a motion which would have given them this is quite frankly beyond me."

Friends of the George and Buckley Building UK Ltd were approached for comment.

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter



Cllr Kate Campbell outside the former George Cinema