

First Muslim faith school will open in Saughton

The Scottish Government Planning and Environmental Appeals Division (DPEA) said it could not accept the council's view that a primary school for up to 100 pupils on Calder Road would cause an 'inappropriate' level of disturbance for local residents.

Edinburgh's first Muslim faith school will open after the council's concerns over noise issues were dismissed in a successful appeal to The Scottish Government.

The appeal outlined planners' "bizarre" conclusion that people living in nearby properties would be "detrimentally impacted".

Businessman Akeel Umar, who is behind the project, blasted a lack of "factual data" and "technical information" to support the council's ruling made last year.

Speaking this week after it was overturned, he said: "We are delighted to hear of the appeal outcome and look forward to serving the local communities as an educational setup, food bank, local support services hub and much more.

"We truly believe the setup at 21 Calder Road will be of a great benefit to the local community."

But a local councillor worried that the school will attract 'people from all over Lothian and beyond travelling by car' said his constituents were left "angry" by the outcome, adding: "They feel ignored and they feel powerless. The planning system has failed them."

In plans, Mr Umar's charity World Care Foundation argued there was a growing need for a school for Muslim children, as the capital's Muslim population had risen from 11,000 in 2011 to 14,00 in 2018, adding it was "set to rise" further.

While being "underpinned by core Islamic values," the private 'Eden School' being set up in the former governor's house at HMP Edinburgh, formerly Saughton Prison, will be "open to all".

Hundreds of locals – 209 in total – lined up to object to the proposal they said would create parking chaos in the area and generate excessive noise from youngsters playing. But 628 letters of support were also received by the council.

Hitting out again after the appeal was lodged, one resident living close to the site said the school "would not in any way benefit the local community" while arguing extra traffic and drop-off and pick-up times would "exacerbate safety issues at an already busy junction".

This would be "unacceptable" to those who moved to the area for its "quiet" nature, they said.

In another objection, it was put forward that the "safety of our community" had to take priority over "a private school being erected".

However the Government's planning reporter who reviewed the case was urged to see the plans as a "fantastic opportunity" to breathe new life into a vacant building" and "reduce inequalities in education services in the region" in the appeal statement submitted on behalf of the Foundation.

“It is difficult to consider a primary school being described as an ‘inappropriate use in a residential area’, as that is where they tend to exist,” it said.

It was also pointed out Edinburgh Council planners appeared to have “over-ruled the conclusion” of the council’s own environmental protection department who raised no objections in response to the application.

“It is very difficult to appreciate how the planning authority came to its conclusion in the face of the noise consultant’s report, and the lack of objection from the Council’s own experts in Environmental Protection,” it added. “This may be due to pressure from the large number of representations received, some of who were objecting to the proposals, however, that is not a reason in itself to refuse a proposal.”

The council was also accused of ‘unacceptable practice’ by refusing the plans without any advanced warning to the applicant “advising that it was deemed to be unacceptable, thus giving the appellant no opportunity to provide further information and resolve any concerns”.

Speaking to the Local Democracy Reporting Service last year after the council’s refusal of his plans, Mr Umar said: “We find the outcome quite strange and bizarre.

“We find it very worrying and quite shocking that two of the internal departments from the council did not object to it. The planning officer did object but did not have any technical grounds – it was just personal opinions. There was no technical information given.”

He said the conclusion reached by the local authority appeared to him as having been influenced by a prejudice toward the Muslim community.

Allowing the appeal and giving the go-ahead, Government

reporter Stephen Hall said any noise generated from the educational facility would be mostly drowned out by traffic from the nearby Calder Road dual carriageway.

In a report, he wrote: "The assessment was considered by the council's environmental protection team, which offered no objection. The assessment and the environmental protection response are the most authoritative pieces of evidence before me on this matter.

"The school proposed in this instance is significantly smaller than a typical school and so would, I anticipate, be associated with relatively lower levels of noise, particularly from children playing. I therefore cannot accept that the likely levels of noise and activity associated with this small primary school are inappropriate for a residential area."

Addressing concerns over parking pressures being exacerbated, Mr Hall added it was anticipated less than half of pupils – around 44 per cent – would arrive by car.

"By staggering the start times for different classes this is claimed to produce a maximum number of trips arriving at the school within a 15-30 minute period of around 15- 18 vehicles," the report stated.

It further said the number of cars accessing the school could be reduced through "encouraging car sharing, promoting safe drop-off points away from the immediate environs of the school, and coordinating a dedicated minibus service".

Mr Hall said: "It seems unlikely that the level of traffic generation would be such as to occasion tailbacks onto Calder Road or encourage a significant increase in drivers choosing to use the tortuous traffic-calmed route via Gaskell Street to access the school."

Independent councillor for Sighthill/Gorgie Ross McKenzie said the decision "makes a mockery of The Scottish Government's own

planning policy”.

He said: “The application was recommended for refusal by planning officers and was refused by committee because of the impact it will have on surrounding residential streets.

“The applicant is clear that the school will attract people from all over Lothian and beyond, and it’s obvious that most of those people will be travelling by car. It’s difficult for me to look my constituents in the eyes after a decision like this – we are telling Edinburgh residents that they need to reduce car use and at the same time allowing a development that will introduce more external traffic onto their streets.

“With no right of appeal for communities, there is nothing that can be done to stop this now. People in the area are angry, they feel ignored and they feel powerless. The planning system has failed them.”

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter

