

Student flats developer urged to go 'back to the drawing board'

Plans for new Edinburgh student flats have been refused due to its outdoor space not being "pleasant" enough to "entice" occupants out of their digs.

Developers have been urged to go "back to the drawing board" and "engage with the community to understand their aspirations" for the Bruntsfield site.

The controversial proposal would have involved bulldozing a one-and-a-half storey office previously used by blindness charity Sight Scotland and replacing it with a five storey block of 145 studio student flats with a shared lounge, gym, cinema room and outdoor amenity space.

A planning application to redevelop the plot at 50 Gillespie Crescent was appealed to the Scottish Government after city council planners failed to issue a decision within the agreed timescale.

After 130 objections were made, and a further 95 in response to the bid to demolish the existing building, a local councillor said the community were "disturbed that the developer chose to bypass scrutiny at council committee and appealed".

However he said he was "over the moon" to see it thrown out.

A decision to refuse planning permission was issued on Tuesday, June 4 by planning reporter Rosie Leven, who said the “usability” of proposed outdoor amenity space would be “very limited as they are predominantly hard surfaced paths which are movement routes to and from the building or planted areas”.

She said: “The proposed strip of amenity space along the western boundary, which is a reasonable quantity of space, would not in my opinion be usable space for residents due to overlooking and overshadowing.

“I consider that there would not be a reasonable amount of sunlight to the rear amenity space and the external spaces as a whole are unlikely to be seen as an attractive place to spend lengthy periods of time.

“High-quality large areas of open space exist a short walk from the site, at Bruntsfield Links and beyond at the Meadows and I expect that future residents would make use of those spaces for longer trips outside.

“However, I consider that the limited usable amenity space on the site would not provide pleasant spaces to entice students from their studios, and suggests some over-development of the site.”

Ms Leven added she shared the council’s concerns over “the scale and design of the proposal” which were also raised by Tollcross Community Council, the Cockburn Association and the Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland.

She said the “pleasant view” along Gillespie Crescent – which sits within the Marchmont, Meadows and Bruntsfield conservation area – would not be “enhanced” by the student block’s northern elevation “sitting fairly close up against the existing trees”.

City centre councillor Finlay McFarlane opposed the plans as he said it would mean losing “a perfectly good historic building in a conservation area for unsympathetic student accommodation”.

He said the S Harrison Developments’ bid “rallied the community into action who were rightly disturbed that the developer chose to bypass scrutiny at council committee and appealed straight to the Reporter.”

He added: “I am over the moon to see this appeal thrown out by the Scottish Government Reporter having joined a large number of residents in objecting to the proposals

“I would now strongly urge the developer to go back to the drawing board and immediately engage with the community to understand their aspirations for the site.”

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter