

Wedding venue operator hits back at planners after marquee refusal

A hotel operator who has invested £3million in an historic Midlothian castle has accused council planners of acting in an 'absolutely outrageous' way after they ordered them to tear down a marquee which has stood for a decade.

Owner of The Original Collection Nick Dent says Melville Castle was insolvent and closed when his company stepped in to take it over two years ago.

Now he says it has been refurbished to a high quality and supports 70 local jobs as a popular wedding venue.

But when his firm applied to extend the temporary permission for a marquee, which Nick says is vital to being able to accommodate weddings, and attempted to gain permission for an alternative permanent solution, the applications were rejected by Midlothian Council.

He is now planning to appeal the decisions saying they send a message to investors not to put money into the county because planners do not care and he has revealed the decisions have put he and his wife Charlotte's plans bring more of their growing business to Midlothian in doubt.

Planners refused to extend the temporary permission for the marquee until the end of 2025 after pointing out it had been in place for 10 years despite the change in operators with their report claiming arguments made by the applicants to justify the extension were, 'very similar' to those made over the last decade of the marquee's existence on the site by previous applicants.

However they also refused permission for an alternative permanent structure on the other side of the castle, leaving the castle operators needing the marquee to meet demand while another solution was sought.

Nick said: "We feel as if we are not being judged on what we have done since taking over Melville Castle but on previous operators who left it insolvent.

"We have requested a site meeting for almost a year now and this has been refused by planners, we can't get them to a meeting or even to answer their phones. We have been given no opportunity to discuss what would be acceptable or find a compromise when we are offering flexibility.

"This is fundamentally wrong. We have invested millions in the castle, we have increased employment and it is an important listed building.

"We have also invested £100,000 in a state of the art sound system that demonstrates our ability to manage noise and that we are serious. The council has carried out its own test of the new system and confirmed it works.

"All of this has completely been ignored. We were going to invest more into Midlothian and the site and were considering locating our software business here alongside creating more jobs in hospitality and supporting more high end tourism in the area. However the message we are getting is don't invest, we don't care about jobs or the future of the Category A castle."

Nick said his wife Charlotte is from Dalkeith and the couple were keen to move more of their business into the county but he said the lack of support and attitude towards them has caused a rethink.

He said: "It is very frustrating, we are going to appeal and pursue this further as without the marquee the wedding

business is not viable and that puts the whole castle in jeopardy as a sustainable business.

“Sadly if the planners refuse to meet, have a dialogue and support businesses that are investing and trying to improve the area then this can not happen. I find this an absolute outrage to the people of Midlothian.

“It is not just jobs at the castle, it is the local suppliers and chain of other businesses involved who are affected if this business does not succeed.”

The Original Collection operates hotels and venues across the United Kingdom from Shetland to the Cotswolds in unique locations.

Planners refused to extend the lifespan of the marquee stating: “The temporary retention of the marquee will have a significant adverse impact on the setting and character of the A listed Melville Castle, the surrounding designed landscape, special landscape area and river valley.”

By Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter