

Fifteen-storey Leegate plans win council approval

Galliard's plans to redevelop the Leegate shopping centre with tower blocks rising to 15 storeys won unanimous approval from Lewisham council's strategic planning committee on July 19. The Lee Manor Society had been calling for a sensible redevelopment of site for more than 10 years. But attempting to overturn a proposal at this late stage after years of private negotiations between the developer and planners is a near impossibility.

The committee proceedings followed an unfortunately familiar pattern. A planning officer outlines the scheme to the meeting. Objectors make their case – in the five minutes that are all that are allowed – on the basis of the council's own planning guidelines. Councillors acknowledge that the scheme does not meet these guidelines – or simply ignore the arguments being put forward – but say that in this instance the guidelines can be ignored. They then go on to approve the scheme.

Members of the Leegate Steering Group* made their case against the excessive height and mass of the redevelopment as well as the fact that many will have only south-facing windows that will lead to overheating. Two of our councillors, who are allowed longer to speak, supported our arguments. Cllr James Rathbone for Lee Green and Cllr Luke Warner for Blackheath argued strongly that the scheme failed to comply with the council's own guidelines on density and height, employment opportunities and housing numbers. Their objections, like those of local residents' groups, were ignored.

A planning officer claimed, wrongly, that Lewisham's draft Local Plan that would have limited the building heights to 12 storeys bore 'no weight.' The truth is that the Plan is 'a material consideration but has very little weight'. What this would have meant in practice is unclear but this lazy thinking on the part of planning officers needs to be challenged.

Galliard has announced a 53-month period for demolition and construction work with the project finished by the end of 2030. The two-year gap in the numbers will be taken up with discussion of the developer's contribution to improve local services (known as a Section 106 agreement), consultation with the Greater London Authority and a six-week window to allow for a judicial review challenge. The whole process could be shortened if the Section 106 talks wrap up quickly. However, according to Galliard, fire safety regulations are 'in a state of flux' post-Grenfell and this might slow progress.

We know councils are under strong pressure to make up for decades of failed housing policies from central government and we have always supported the provision of more homes at Leegate. Councillors and planners have for years referred to Lewisham's 10,000-strong housing waiting list. Has the profusion of the town centre towers done nothing to reduce this number? Does Lewisham have any idea what its housing shortage is? And do people want to live 15 storeys high?

After years of lobbying for a decent redevelopment of the centre we end up with a scheme that will tower over Lee, dwarfing the many historic buildings that ring the crossroads. Bad as this scheme is for Lee, it is likely to be replicated around the borough. Bell Green is already in the planners' sights.

Charles Batchelor

*Chaired by former councillor Jim Malory and Including Lee Green Lives, Lee Manor Society, Blackheath Society, Lee Forum, Lee Traders, Manor House Gardens Friends, Manor House Library Friends and Lee Fair Share.