

Heath Buildings – 2024/0189

This application is to replace a comparatively old building that is tired and offers both poor residential and commercial space. It has no real architectural merit and the time has probably come to replace it. The original application on this site was refused last year and this revised application has been modified in a several important areas. The proposed replacement building will not be to everyone's taste and there will be those who argue that it is still too large and fails to provide cohesion with neighbouring buildings.

Plans are for a building that is some 45% larger than the existing building. The commercial space will reduce and the number of units will be one less. But the space should be more modern and of higher standard. The major change is with the residential space which is to be more than doubled with the provision of high-quality modern accommodation. To achieve this requires a raising of the roof line to a level above the adjacent property. This automatically provides the building with a presence that might be seen as imposing. But it is set back from the roadside and this should help attenuate the increased height.

Importantly, this is a local project and not one driven from outside the community. While FEDORA might prefer a smaller building, it is recognised that this is not feasible without a potentially significant adverse effect on the viability of the development. The prospect of a smaller building therefore seems unlikely particularly given the express need by the local authority to make efficient use of the site for planning purposes and achieve a real increase in the number of housing units. If this application does not proceed, consideration needs to be given to the likely alternative. This site will almost certainly get redeveloped one way or another in due course whether that be by the existing owner or another party. The owner clearly has the option of using presumed permitted development rights to expand the existing building upwards producing what could be a large, ugly, and unbalanced building. Alternatively, he could sell it to another developer (or even a national retailer) that lacked interest in regeneration of the High Street more generally and would seek to build upwards so as maximise the space for accommodation with little regard for aesthetics. What was planned by Marks & Spencer in Claygate provides an interesting pointer.

Comments on the previous application included concern about the loss of public space at the front of the building and the impact on much appreciated local events held on that space. Leaving aside the fact that the major public events using that space are those arranged by the developer himself, the revised application largely preserves the current build line at ground floor level therefore leaving available public space substantially unchanged.

FEDORA considers that change on the site is inevitable. Given that this project is being driven from within the community and will bring economic benefit to the community, FEDORA is therefore broadly supportive of this revised application BUT with the hugely important caveat that the rights of the residents of Midgarth must be fully assessed as a crucial part of the consideration of this application.

When considering this application and assessing the scale of support or opposition, FEDORA considers that it is important to take into account the views of local residents only and to ignore multiple letters of support or objection from the same address. In addition, FEDORA considers that while councillors from outside Oxshott always offer an interesting and objective perspective, it is the views of ward councillors that should be afforded greater weight given the impact on the local community.