

“Heritage Quarter” scheme stuck in the mud.

Like an old supermarket trolley thrown off the Promenade, Gravesend’s ironically named “Heritage Quarter” scheme is firmly stuck in the Gravesend mud.

Despite the Council having resolved to grant planning permission as long ago as April 2013, Council Leader John Cubitt has recently taken the desperate step of extending indefinitely the currently lapsed termination date for the Development Agreement with developers Edinburgh House “to a date to be agreed”. As usual with matters concerned with the cosy arrangements between the Council and EH, the matter was decided by the Leader alone, without consulting other members of the Council, never mind the public - so much for democracy under the new Council leadership. The stated reason for the Executive Decision is “*to enable Edinburgh House Estates to secure the necessary funding to allow the development to proceed*”.

The short facts are that:

- ten years on from signing the DA, the development has stalled
- the developers are currently struggling to obtain finance for the Heritage Quarter Development.
- no steps have been taken by the developers to discharge any of the conditions of the planning permission;
- no steps have been taken to enter necessary agreements with other land owners (notably St George’s church, whose Rectory and Church hall would be demolished for the scheme);
- the accounts for the companies who are legal parties to the Development Agreement were filed as late as possible with Companies House and reveal that their liabilities exceed their assets and are only able to be treated on a going-concern basis as a result of

the support of the Edinburgh House Estates (Holdings) Ltd group of companies.

- Independent financiers have indicated that in their view the retail proposals are not fundable and the only glimmer of hope is for them to build the hundreds of cheap high rise flats in the Eastern Quarter of the most historic part of Gravesend town Centre. Although the proposed flats are cheap and undersized, no affordable housing for Gravesend's families in need is provided in the Eastern Quarter.

The timetable for the Development Agreement was initially signed in 2005 and time has been extended previously to give the developer more time to act. This time, the crucial termination date has passed and the Council holds all the cards to enable them to get out of this disastrous partnership, which has frozen regeneration of Gravesend for over 10 years.

Instead of doing so, the Council has extended the period for termination and the frozen regeneration and blight indefinitely. So while other historic Kent towns, like Margate, Ramsgate, Whitstable, Folkestone, none of which have the fantastic rail connections with London that Gravesend enjoys, all enjoy cultural and community regeneration, the life blood continues to seep out of our historic town centre. The Council and the developers no longer have the excuse of the Urban Gravesham judicial review for their failure to deliver a single brick of the regeneration.

Meanwhile all hope that the replacement of Labour's John Burden with the new Conservative leader John Cubitt might bring a breath of fresh thinking to the future of the town have been dashed.

Mr Cubitt had a chance to get the Council out of the deathly embrace of Edinburgh House and to engage with the community to find a different solution to the need for regeneration of the town centre which we could all support instead of the council supporting unquestioningly the disastrous project.

Sadly, with the simple "administrative executive decision", taken without the involvement of any of the other elected members of the Council, or any

notice to the public, he has unilaterally thrown away his “Get out of Jail Free” card and put all hope for the future of the town back into the hands of a partner whose track record on regeneration is one of proven failure. With no fixed date for termination the developer now has complete power over any future progress and the future of the entire Council landholding in the town centre is now in their hands. The extension is unconditional. The developer now has no requirement or deadline to do anything at all. The Council is unable to bring in other partners to help with regeneration of our town as the option on the land is held by the developer, until “a date to be agreed”.

It is often said of alcoholics that the first step in getting well is to admit that you have a drink problem. It is time for Gravesham to admit that the development partnership with Edinburgh House has been an abject and expensive failure and is doing serious harm to the future of our town Gravesend deserves better.

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