

Good morning and thank you for the invitation to address this inquiry into the future of the Debenhams building. My name is Peter Bower and I should begin by declaring my interests in this matter. I have been a Staines Resident for over 50 years, I live in the centre of the Staines Conservation Area only 450m from Debenhams front door, I'm chair of the Staines Village Residents and Traders Association whose boundary adjoins Debenhams and I also represent the Riverside Residents Coalition of local residents associations which speaks for more than a thousand Staines residents.

We all urge you to reject this appeal against the council's decision to refuse planning permission for the demolition of the Debenhams building and construction of two 15 storey residential towers on the site. Our reasons for opposing this redevelopment are two-fold. First a very strong desire to retain the shape and scale of the existing building because of the positive contribution it makes to the character and appearance - and even the status - of Staines town centre. Second an equally strong antipathy to the two ugly towers which will replace it - the design of these can only at best be described as functional and their shape and size is completely out of character with its surroundings and especially detrimental to the conservation area.

By way of evidence on these issues I would refer you to one of the pre-inquiry documents that appeared on the planning website a couple of months ago. This is a set of “Accurate Visual Representations” prepared by a specialist consultant on behalf of the developer, in effect a series of before and after photos of the site taken from a variety of viewpoints, albeit from angles that tend to underplay the visual impact of the proposed redevelopment on the skyline and streetscape of the area.

The merits of the existing building are clear from the before photos. These show how the listed Debenhams building complements and doesn't dominate the Georgian buildings in the conservation area and very cleverly fits within and is framed by other listed buildings, despite being a very large, bulky building. Its very shape and scale makes a statement about the status of Staines itself – the largest market town in the area and a commercial centre. No wonder that it is frequently referred to (including by the developer itself) as “iconic” and is so highly regarded not just by Staines residents but also by the many locals who regularly use the town.

In contrast, the after images reveal two monstrous 15 storey towers, in themselves of particularly poor design, which are totally unsympathetic to surrounding buildings which they will dwarf. A particularly damaging contrast is that with the Victorian town hall which sits opposite Debenhams in the conservation area across the old market square – interestingly there is no after image of this view.

The height of these new buildings is of particular concern and you might like to note that the Staines Development Framework, recently prepared and adopted by Spelthorne council as a Supplementary Planning Document supporting the emerging Local Plan, identifies the Debenhams site as lying within a zone in which building heights are limited to eight storeys.

The developer told us at a consultation event that they had paid a price for the site that could only be justified by putting 200-plus flats in very high towers on it. So we understand their current anxieties; but this cannot justify approving the development.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise the strength of opposition among residents to the Debenhams demolition and re-development. In the last couple of years we have seen a lot of campaigning around the

planned over-development of Staines but no single scheme has generated as much concern and opposition as the Debenhams site. And at the heart of this opposition is a great fondness for the current building and its contribution to the character and appearance of the area – and a great antipathy towards the “ugly sisters” which might replace it.

We urge you to reject this appeal.