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Blot on Epsom Down’s west horizon to grow?

11 January 2025



The “Croydonisation” of Woking will continue after a 26-storey town centre tower block on the former BHS site was approved. The plans for the 272-home 85-metre-tall building are nearly identical to those previously rejected in March 2024 but have been signed off following changes to Woking Borough Council’s housing targets and further clarifications from the developers. Donard Real Estate will demolish the former store to create the Crown Gardens project. The build-to-rent project will include 28 affordable homes as well as retail and commercial zones on the ground floor of the Commercial Way site. There would also be public space landscaping to improve the area around Christ Church.

Approving the plans – which were also under a separate appeal – would help the council meet its new, higher housing targets and help take pressure off green belt sites. The meeting was also assured the building would be predominantly made of brick, limiting the potential of weather damaging external cladding. The town centre had to be closed off after cladding fell from the Hilton Hotel building this year due to storms. Speaking on behalf of the developers was Mervyn McFarland. He said, “Crown Gardens will deliver 272 high-quality build-to-rent homes addressing the growing need for housing and helping Woking’s residents, particularly young people and families, to stay in Woking and contribute to the town’s vitality and growth. It will help alleviate pressure on traditional housing stock while also contributing to meeting housing targets. It will free up homes better suited to families and other demographics, contributing to a more balanced housing market in Woking. Crown Gardens will support Woking’s regeneration, bringing up to 700 new residents to the town centre. This is expected to bring in around £10m expenditure annually in local spending, boosting businesses.”

The limited parking at the site was no longer considered a valid reason to object to the plans given its proximity to Woking Railway Station and active travel options. The January 7 planning committee also noted that a similar high-rise application at Technology House was allowed on appeal, with the Planning Inspector saying parking options were sufficient. Councillor Rob Leach (Liberal Democrat, St Johns) said: “It’s clear that the development will help meet the housing needs that we have and the new government target building levels, to a significant extent, are helped by this. I’ve always been resistant to skyscrapers in Woking, what I’ve called the Croydonisation of Woking, in the past, but I think this has to be preferable to incursions on the green belt where that can be avoided.”

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