Madam,

Virtually all of us like the sound of conservation areas. It’s a bit like approving of virtue, apple pie, motherhood and kittens. But there is little point in having a conservation area if it’s almost all fluff and very little substance.

The confidence of the Egham Residents’ Association in the Egham Conservation Area and the planning regime promoting and protecting it has been badly damaged by the story of planning applications for the 40-44 Egham High Street site that I mentioned today in my comments on Egham town centre planning policies.

Planning application RU.17/1164 was a scheme for the site including retail units and 105 students units. The residents’ association opposed it on two main grounds: 1) That it was seeking to provide yet more student accommodation in the town, and 2) The design of the building. On behalf of our association I told Runnymede Council’s planning committee that it represented an unhappy marriage between Stalinism and Legoland. The committee agreed with the essence of that part of my argument and rejected the application. But in so doing, it over-rode the recommendation of the chief planning officer, Ian Maguire. He had recommended it for approval even though the site is in the Egham Conservation Area. I subsequently asked him if he would have recommended it for a planning consent if Policy EE5 in the Draft Plan had already been fully operational, and he said that yes, he would have done so. I have attached a picture showing what the development would have looked like.

A further planning application for the site, RU.18/1660 (retail and 107 student units) was then submitted and I have also attached a picture showing it. It is undoubtedly better than the previous one in design terms, and it won a planning consent last week. But is the design really suitable for a key ‘gateway’ site in a conservation area? Will it - to quote Policy EE5 - preserve let alone enhance the character of the Egham Conservation Area? Our association doesn’t think so. It really makes us wonder what the purpose of a conservation area is.

Our anxieties are increased by the impending planning application for Egham’s ‘Gateway West’ site, part of which is in the conservation area. The initial building designs do not make us confident of an enhancement to the conservation area. Furthermore the boundary of the conservation area runs across Station Road North -which is where ‘Gateway West’ is situated. The initial building drawings suggest that the scheme will make a weak effort to acknowledge the conservation area in that part of the site inside it. But right next door would be the seven-story edifice I complained about today. The Station Road North street scene should be kept as a whole and should not be artificially divided to reflect a conservation area boundary. To put it another way, all of Station Road North should be made part of the conservation area.

The Egham Conservation Area should do what is says on the tin. It should not promise much more than it delivers. But we very much fear that that is what will happen unless Policy EE5 is applied in demanding, rigorous fashion.

Chris Fisher

Planning Co-ordinator, Egham Residents’ Association