# Plans to convert derelict offices into homes rejected by council



Ambitious proposals to transform a set of derelict town centre offices in Kent into a new residential neighbourhood have been rejected by the Tunbridge Wells Borough Council. The plans aimed to replace the former AXA offices, known as Philips House and Eynsham House, with a development featuring 44 homes. This decision came during a meeting of the council's planning committee on April 2, 2023.

The office buildings, which have been vacant since early 2023 after housing AXA Health for roughly three decades, were the subject of proposals submitted by Kier Properties and the Housing Growth Partnership (HGP) in May 2022. The developers argued that there is a significant need for family housing in the area, suggesting that office space is less necessary in the current climate. David Bridges, the Managing Director of Kier, expressed his belief in the project, stating, "We believe this is a terrific scheme – it will transform a redundant site with beautiful family homes." Planning agent Nick Alston supported this view, indicating a wide public backing for the development despite some expressed concerns.

Public interest in the proposal was considerable, with 73 representations submitted to the planning department, 62 of which were in support of the plans. However, not all feedback was in favour. Paul Avis, chairman of the Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society, critiqued the design as "frankly mediocre" and alleged that the supportive comments were "mobilised by housebuilders' pressure groups." Concerns were raised about the potential exclusivity of the homes, with Labour councillor Hugo Pound, who could not be present at the meeting, arguing that the development would effectively price out young local residents. In his absence, a statement was read voicing his concern over the proposed prices, suggesting that only individuals with considerable wealth could afford to live there. He emphasised the need for more affordable housing options, advocating for the construction of flats, which he argued would better accommodate local families.

Further complicating the debate, Lib Dem councillor Brendan Le Page pointed out that 70% of the planned houses contained four bedrooms, a design choice that might limit the diversity of families and income levels residing in the town centre. Notably, the proposed development did not include any affordable homes, which developers argued would render the scheme economically unfeasible. However, they pledged to contribute £363,000 towards affordable housing initiatives elsewhere in the area.

Despite the planning officers’ recommendation for approval, which cited the site’s allocation for residential development in the local plan, the planning committee ultimately opted to defer the plans. The committee requested the addition of a new footpath and modifications to the housing designs, indicating a desire for a more inclusive and accessible neighbourhood configuration moving forward.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.housinggrowth.com/kier-property-and-hgp-residential-jv-acquires-development-site-in-tunbridge-wells/> - This article provides details about the acquisition of the site where Philips House and Eynsham House are located, confirming that these buildings were previously occupied by AXA Health and have been vacant since early 2023.
* <https://crescent-road.co.uk> - The website outlines the development plans for 44 homes on the site of the former AXA offices, aligning with the proposals and the objectives to address family housing needs in the area.
* <https://www.kentlive.news/news/kent-news/tunbridge-wells-residents-oppose-plans-8348280> - This article discusses the public interest in the proposals, indicating that a majority of feedback was supportive while also highlighting criticisms regarding the design and affordability of the planned homes.
* <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-kent-65148082> - The BBC report mentions the rejection of the plans by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, including details from the planning committee meeting on April 2, 2023, reinforcing the timeline and decision made by the council.
* <https://www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/news/2023/april/office-to-housing-conversion-plans-rejected> - This local government news release outlines the rationale behind the planning committee's decision, including concerns raised about the lack of affordable housing in the proposed development.