

Temporary street structures being removed

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter

Edinburgh's leading heritage watchdog has urged the council to review the impact that temporary outdoor seating had on the capital's historic streets, as the 'eating huts' built during the pandemic are finally being removed.

The on-street dining spaces first appeared around the city's Old Town in 2020 after the Government relaxed planning rules to help bars and restaurants make up for significantly reduced indoor capacities.

Terry Levinthal, director of The Cockburn Association said: "What we were looking at is something that was very particular responding to a very particular set of needs.

"Those circumstances have gone and certainly a review and a wider conversation about how we use public space to support businesses and the hospitality sector would be a positive outcome from it with all the experience we now have."

While they helped businesses to survive the difficult and uncertain period, the wooden structures also attracted criticism for their appearance.

And the loss of parking bays and space on the road has apparently led to an increase in pavement parking and traffic issues in the busy city centre.

Mr Levinthal said: "Very early on because of the lockdown restrictions because people weren't coming into offices there was less traffic about so initially there was less of a conflict. But as things began to normalise more and more then those conflicts emerged.

"There was a series of issues about not only the impact on the aesthetic and heritage qualities of the city but also the longer term impact of erecting what were essentially private spaces in the public realm – in effect the privatisation of public space."

He described the manner in which the temporary seating arrived as "a whole series of ad-hoc interventions being driven by individuals".

He added: "Any interventions in the street scape needs to be undertaken from a perspective of enhancing the special qualities of the city, not undermining them.

"The outdoor seating arrangements we've seen is something fundamentally different from the table licensing regime which we haven't had a problem with over the years."

Earlier this year businesses which benefited from having the dining sheds outside their premises applied to keep them permanently. However, the council refused all planning permissions and said they had to be removed by October.

This week the removal process began following their year-and-a-half stint on the streets, and workers were seen taking the huts apart and loading the timber into vans.

Mr Levinthal encouraged the council to "treat what has happened as a learning experience".

He said: "Record and understand both the positives and negatives that have taken place so that we have the evidence in place should we need to address it in the future."

Meanwhile, the user behind the 'SOS Cockburn Street' Twitter account, who regularly documented the traffic and pavement parking issues caused by the huts on Cockburn Street, said this week: "It's good to finally see public spaces returned to their rightful owners, the public."

"Let's hope that we never again see the council flout planning rules and place the interests of private businesses over citizens."

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