

Old Town crime could be tackled with dispersal orders

Last resort anti-social behaviour powers could be harnessed by the police in Edinburgh to crack down on increasing 'lawlessness and bloody violence' in the Old Town.

City council leader Cammy Day said dispersal orders could be used to tackle crime in the area, following a desperate plea by businesses for help.

An open letter sent to police chief, councillors and MSPs including the First Minister said "shocking anti-social behaviour and unbelievable levels of theft" had reached "unprecedented and totally unacceptable levels" and were "corroding" the historic city centre streets.

Among the claims was that of dead bodies lying in the street for hours 'with the public walking by thinking they were just sleeping'.

Police said addressing the problem was "an absolute priority" and have widened the Old Town's bail exclusion zone which can ban offenders from visiting.

The council said that more CCTV cameras have been installed to monitor the situation.

It comes more than a year after a group of local traders warned the council the area had become a 'no go zone' for many as a result of the issues faced.

The Tron Area Business Group said: "Fifteen months ago, we expressed our dire concerns regarding escalating crime, including vicious violence, ugly drug and alcohol abuse, drug dealing, and alarmingly high levels of theft in the city centre.

"We find ourselves once again compelled to shed light on these same issues, as the situation has yet to improve.

"The lawlessness and extreme antisocial behaviour, including public indecency, intimidation, and threatening behaviour towards residents, business staff, and visitors to our beautiful capital city, have reached unprecedented and totally unacceptable levels."

Responding to the comments at a full council meeting on Thursday Cllr Day said: "I'm more than happy to meet with the traders there and I did speak earlier on about the need for potentially the use of dispersal orders."

A dispersal order is a rarely-used measure which gives the police, in consultation with the council, the power to designate a zone in which officers can direct a person to leave if it's suspected they are likely to cause trouble.

Cllr Day said they had been used previously but acknowledged they "weren't popular with the police".

He added: "I accept that's only one option, but I would rather meet with city centre councillors and businesses to come up with a solution."

The open letter said incidents of break-ins and windows being broken were now "commonplace" and staff working in the area had become traumatised after witnessing "drunken and drugged individuals using extreme violence on each other" and people "physically attacking and punching stationary road traffic signs".

It added businesses were spending “literally thousands of pounds a week” on security in order to feel safe.

The group have called for specific changes to be made such as “greatly increased and sustained police presence” and a review the number off-licences locally as well as relocation of the methadone dispensary on Spittal Street.

They also want members of The Scottish Government, council, NHS, police, courts and the third sector to get together to hold an “emergency summit” to “develop an action plan for change”.

Chief Inspector Murray Tait, local area commander for Edinburgh City Centre, said: “I want to make it clear to all local businesses and residents within the Tron, Hunter Square and Royal Mile area that all incidents of criminality remain an absolute priority for Edinburgh Division and are investigated thoroughly and professionally whenever they are reported.

“Over the last 12 months, my officers have worked with the City of Edinburgh Council and a range of stakeholders to respond to issues of criminality and anti-social behaviour, but also to seek increased support provision in the area and explore potential environmental improvements.

“As well as enforcement, officers are signposting offenders to a range of specialist support to assist with issues such as homelessness, addiction and mental health.

“Working alongside the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, we have established a wider bail exclusion zone to include the Southside corridor, in addition to the existing Old Town exclusion zone.

“We have also just concluded a six month programme which was partly funded by Police Scotland’s Local Community Policing fund, which sought a holistic approach to working with

partners to deliver increased individual support.

“In addition, officers chair a regular working group set up to drive improvements in the area, which includes cleaning and re purposing opportunities.

“We continue to engage regularly with residents and all local businesses to tackle the issues raised and this remains an ongoing commitment.”

Cllr Tim Pogson, chair of Edinburgh Community Safety and Justice Partnership, said: “We’re committed to continuing to work with Police Scotland and other partners to address issues of anti-social behaviour in the capital.

“We take incidents around Hunters Square, The Tron and Royal Mile very seriously as the area is a prime public space in the centre of our beautiful city and we want to make sure it’s accessible and inviting to all.

“For example CCTV colleagues have installed a new digital camera within the area that has a pan tilt and zoom camera with an additional four static cameras which are monitored 24/7.”



The Royal Mile Edinburgh