

Councillors unanimously reject vehicle access at St James Quarter

When guests arrive at the luxury W Edinburgh Hotel in St James Quarter next month there will be little in the way of a red carpet as they will have to walk from the top of Elder Street to the entrance, or arrive through the underground car park.

At Thursday's Transport and Environment Committee meeting councillors voted unanimously not to allow a traffic order to be brought into effect on Elder Street, part of St James Square, James Craig Walk, St James Place, Little King Street and Cathedral Lane.

But according to the developer there is already detailed planning consent for drop offs at the new luxury hotel in the detailed planning consent granted some time ago – and in any case they claim ownership of the land in the square.

In a submission from December 2021 the developer stated that the square would be a "lively space" between Leith Street and Elder Street. It also stated that this would be principally a pedestrian space although it would also be designated for emergency vehicles. Council officers said that it would be for the developer to show that there would not be a safety risk to

pedestrians and cyclists either passing through or pausing in the Square.

Council officers recommended approval of an ETR0 – which is an Experimental Traffic Regulation Order – to allow controlled access for certain motor vehicles to get to the front door of the W Edinburgh Hotel. The land in the Square would have been conveyed to the council and then leased back to the developer on a long term basis as part of the plan.

The vehicles would have included executive coaches, and in July 2022 a simulation exercise was conducted with a drive through of the square with council officers present.

Council officers had apparently indicated at that point that the council *“was willing to consider controlled access to the Square, conditional on the developer satisfactorily addressing the observations arising from the simulation exercise. The observations being, that the square is designed primarily as a pedestrian environment and that there is limited room available for vehicular movements without giving rise to conflict with pedestrians and cyclists. The developer was advised that careful consideration needed to be given to the size of vehicles permitted to enter the square, the number of vehicles that could be in the square at any one time, and the arrangements that would need to be in place to safely manage the square in the interests of all users”*.

In January 2023 the developer asked if an ETR0 could be trialled and Council officers said in March that they would support that move in principle. It was recommended that the order could be reviewed at two and four months after its implementation, and it could literally be overseen by CCTV cameras already in place.

Martin Perry Managing Director, Development Europe at Nuveen said earlier in the week: “St James Quarter is extremely surprised by the ill-informed comments from councillors in

relation to this proposal. We want to clarify that the land in question belongs to St James Quarter and already has detailed planning consent for taxis and small executive coaches to drop off at the hotel.

“This proposal has passed all safety audits by road management experts, including those appointed by the City of Edinburgh Council, for either two taxis or one executive coach dropping off at any one time at a controlled speed of 5mph or less.

“The experimental traffic regulation order is in place to trial the planning consent, ensuring that there are no conflicts with the very limited pedestrian and cycle movements in the area. It is apparent from the comments of councillors that they have not been made aware of these facts or have misunderstood the information that’s been presented to them.”

In light of today’s decision by the council Mr Perry said: “We are currently looking at the implications and potential next steps.”

COUNCILLORS

Earlier this week Transport Convener Cllr Scott Arthur said on Twitter: “Pedestrians are at the top of the transport hierarchy in Edinburgh, not celebrities.” and during the meeting he stated that the recommendation went against the “feeling and culture” of the committee. He said that transport policy had moved on in the last five to ten year period although he admitted that there are in fact very few dedicated pedestrian spaces in the city. The administration had indicated they would not recommend proceeding with the ETR0 as

the square is “principally a pedestrian space and an area where people can sit and linger”.

Cllr Katrina Faccenda questioned what was meant by an “executive coach” and was told it would be a ten-seater, indicating that it could be no bigger than a minibus. In addition to controlling access to certain types of vehicle it was proposed the mechanical bollards would only allow two taxis or one “executive coach” in the Square at any one time.



At the top of Elder Street looking to the W Hotel Permitted vehicles would have included taxis and private hire cars and emergency vehicles, and the order would have restricted bicycles to accessing the square in both directions using a “dedicated shared space for pedestrians, cyclists and emergency vehicles linking Elder Street and James Craig Walk”.

Executive Director of Place, Paul Lawrence said: “This matter which has been ongoing for a long time is trying to marry transport and economic development matters to come to a solution which is not easy to do.”

The council, the Scottish Government and the developer were all involved in a specially devised financial arrangement which allowed the development to go ahead when it was thought there might be a multi-million pound shortfall.

Cllr Kevin Lang asked: "When the planning permission was approved what was the expectation at the time?" to which the council officer replied it was much the same as the report before the committee set out.

Lib Dem group leader Cllr Kevin Lang said: "I use this route quite often. It has struck me what a popular thoroughfare this has become. So to approve an ETR0 would need us to feel there is a possibility of us doing this in a safe way, and I just don't see how that's going to be possible.

"I'm just not convinced that even going with an experiment is the right thing to do, and even going with an experiment over a short-term basis could I think have unintended consequences."

Councillor Danny Aston said: "I don't doubt for a second the thought and work that's gone in here from officers in to trying to find a viable compromise here.

"Fundamentally it is still riding a coach and taxis through our transport and planning polices and a lot of unflattering things have been said about the hotel's appearance...but this specific area, St James Square, is actually quite good public realm – and it's certainly light years ahead of what preceded it.

"Permitting even limited vehicular access could undermine the benefit of that new public realm and I think we have grounds for saying the change that is being sought is unnecessary."

In September 2022 Nuveen applied for permission to use St James Square as a festival event space and that application was recommended for refusal. Despite that a Christmas après

ski bar – Bar Hutte – was constructed for the second year, although complaints over noise ensued and councillors voted to close the attraction.

From the council website: “An Experimental Traffic Regulation Order (ETRO) is like a Traffic Regulation Order (TRO). It is a legal mechanism used to introduce trial changes to the layout of a road for a limited period of 18 months.”



Elder Street