

# **Safety concerns over W Hotel plans for vehicle access in pedestrian area**

**Plans to allow taxis and coaches access to a busy Edinburgh city centre pedestrian area so that a new five-star hotel can “show off” celebrity guests have sparked “serious safety concerns”.**

The W Hotel wants to give passenger vehicles permission to drive up to its main entrance at the St James Quarter when it opens next month, with managers of the luxury 12-storey development arguing it is needed to facilitate “red carpet events” and to improve access for guests with mobility issues, according to a council report.

But there is opposition from councillors, including the city’s transport convener who said the shopping complex had a “fantastic” underground car park – and joked the red carpet could be “rolled out down there”.

Another said he feared there would be a risk to the public with “large vehicles turning in an enclosed area of high pedestrian footfall”.

Officials have recommended the Transport Committee to approve an ‘experimental’ traffic order which would allow two taxis or one executive coach at any one time to enter St James Square through automatic bollards at the end of Elder Street.

The measures would be in place for an initial two-month trial and extended if there is a “positive outcome” of a review.

A report said the Square is “designed primarily as a pedestrian environment” and has “limited room available for vehicular movements without giving rise to conflict with pedestrians and cyclists”.

It added: “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.”

The council said hotel bosses and developers indicated during discussions they wanted the Experimental Traffic Regulation Order (ETRO) to accommodate “visitors with mobility issues” and to “show off A-list guests, say if they had red carpet events”.

Labour Transport Convener Scott Arthur said he felt “uncomfortable” with the proposed arrangement as the space had “huge potential”.

He said: “It looks like quite a good public space, and there’s not a lot of spaces in Edinburgh that are like that.”

Cllr Arthur added: “We’ll have to decide if we should design the city around people or celebrities.

“The St James Quarter has a fantastic car park, it’s quite famous – surely the red carpet could be rolled out down there.

“There’s a difference between having arrangements for individuals who have particular access needs to just allowing taxis to generally rank in the area, not that that’s what they’re proposing, but that’s the reality of how it’ll work.”

SNP city centre councillor Finlay McFarlane said: “We all know

that pedestrianised space in the city centre is at a premium and where we have it, we must protect it.

“We can’t ignore that the St James Quarter is mere seconds away from the coach station, and is incredibly well served by bus, tram, train, on foot and even by private vehicle through the substantial underground parking provision. If we can’t make the case for maintaining a pedestrian space here as a council, where can we?”

“I have serious safety concerns about large vehicles turning in an enclosed area of high pedestrian footfall in addition to the impact these proposals and increased vehicles would have on the residents of Elder Street and St James Square.”

The Transport Committee will decide on whether to progress the ETR0 a meeting on Thursday.

St James Quarter was approached for comment and Martin Perry, Managing Director, Development Europe at Nuveen, said: “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.”

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter

