

Councillor calls for a crackdown on Royal Mile shops

A crackdown on gift shops on Edinburgh's Royal Mile operated in properties owned by the council has been backed by a city councillor who says they make him feel "embarrassed" when walking down the historic street.

A discussion over the authority's powers to dictate how its tenants use commercial units was sparked during a meeting after Marco Biagi proposed not renewing the lease for a gift shop on the High Street.

The decision has now been delayed until January so the legal implications of the move can be investigated.

The SNP councillor said he supported measures to control the proliferation of traders selling souvenirs and trinkets around the city centre – complaining the capital's "window on the world has a see you Jimmy hat in it".

Officials said if the council went down the route of using its ownership of commercial properties to dictate what they sell there would be "consequences, particularly financial ones".

The Royal Mile, where Edinburgh Council owns 46 units, has become awash with gift shops in the last 20 years as rental prices have shot up.

A routine decision to extend the lease of one located at 46 High Street went before the Finance and Resources Committee. A report proposed a 25-year extension of the deal between the council and the Gold Brothers, who run a number of such stores around the Old Town, but with the annual rent increased from £54,600 to £62,400 per annum.

Cllr Biagi said: "The report invites us to approve a 25-year lease extension on the terms outlined therein. Legally and financially, what happens if we don't?"

After being told this would mean the lease would expire at the end of September next year, he recalled former city centre councillor David Beckett "having serious issues with the proliferation of gift shops on the Royal Mile.

"He and I at that point, myself in a different capacity, were supportive of measures to try and control that. I do note that the strategy states...that local authorities holding an investment portfolio can provide the council with an element of control and influence such as the Royal Mile where the council owns a significant number of commercial properties."

He asked officials whether it would be competent for the council to seek to "use our portfolio of properties in an area to build a sense of place in that area".

In response estates manager Peter Watton said the council needed to be "consistent with our tenants across the piece".

He said if an existing tenant, respective of who they are, have fulfilled all their obligations set out in a lease they are offered an extension. Mr Watton said the reality was "the man drives the market".

He said any action toward changing how the properties were used would have to be part of a "wider debate about the control in relation to the uses that are on the Royal Mile".

He said: "If we go down the route of using our ownership to dictate that it has consequences, particularly financial ones.

"What's happened over time is you've seen this change from kind of bespoke offerings of retail, and it started with the coffee shops – when Starbucks moved into the corner of Hunter Square and paid a huge rent the ripple effect of that for the coming years was significant in terms of rental values on the Royal Mile.

"And then came the tartan traders. It always was there but it wasn't the spike we experienced I suppose maybe 15, 16 years ago that we see today and everything that seems that became available on the Royal Mile.

"Operators had the ability to outbid other potential users because of the return they could make from what they were doing."

Mr Watton said the council was "not trying to justify the retail mix on the Royal Mile" but pointed out its leases "do not control what you can and can't sell".

Cllr Biagi proposed rejecting the Gold Brothers' lease extension but withdrew his position after Labour convener Mandy Watt suggested postponing the decision until January to obtain legal advice.

The committee backed this by seven votes to four with the Conservatives and Lib Dems voting to approve the lease.

After the meeting Cllr Biagi told the Local Democracy Reporting Service: "I want to walk down the Royal Mile and not feel embarrassed.

"It's probably the most visited street in Scotland but right now our window on the world has a see you Jimmy hat in it."

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter

