

Councillors asked to revisit decision on vehicle access to St James Quarter

Edinburgh councillors will be asked to u-turn on a move to block vehicles from entering a busy city centre pedestrian area.

Developers of the St James Quarter were previously refused a traffic regulation order (TRO) to allow taxis and small coaches to drop-off and pick-up guests staying at the new W Hotel.

However 10 months on from the decision it will be revisited next week, after the council was threatened with legal action.

Councillors agreed in October that St James Square had been “designed to be principally a pedestrian space and an area where people could sit and linger” as the request for vehicle access via Elder Street was unanimously turned down by the transport committee.

Developers and part-owners Nuveen said they were “extremely surprised by the ill-informed comments from councillors” following the meeting, adding that the land “belongs to St James Quarter and already has detailed planning consent for taxis and small executive coaches to drop off at the hotel”.

A new report confirmed the square is currently owned by the St James Quarter but is due to be transferred to the council “as part of the land acquisition agreement between the council and the developer”. It will then be leased back to the shopping

centre's owners.

"The council, as landlord, has the right under the lease to approve (or reject) activities that fall outwith the permitted use of the square (which is primarily for hosting events)," the report said.

In an email to the local authority developers argued operation of the W Hotel could be compromised without taxi and coach access to the square and there was a "long-standing expectation" this would be granted.

"The significant impact of all guests being forced to use the public car park for check in and drop off as the first experience of a five-star hotel offer in Edinburgh would, in Marriotts view, be internationally unique and this would damage the custom, reputation and therefore the income of the hotel and the City of Edinburgh," said a statement sent from Nuveen's Ed Webb to the council last month.

Last year after officials said hotel bosses and developers indicated they wanted vehicle access to accommodate "visitors with mobility issues" and to "show off A-list guests, say if they had red carpet events," transport convener Scott Arthur said the St James Quarter "has a fantastic car park," adding: "Surely the red carpet could be rolled out down there."

Cllr Arthur, who also is the newly-elected Labour MP for Edinburgh South West, said he felt "uncomfortable" with the proposed arrangement as the space had "huge potential".

The report going to next week's transport committee said: "In January 2023, the Edinburgh St James entity which owns the W Hotel petitioned the Court of Session for a judicial review of the decision taken by the committee.

"The council, with the developer's cooperation, have subsequently asked the Court of Session to sist this process on the basis that this matter is reported back to committee

for reconsideration, ensuring that all relevant information is available to inform decision making.”

Transport officials are recommending councillors to reverse their original decision and grant a TR0 to allow exemptions for a maximum of two taxis at a time or one “small bus” with maximum of 25 seats and no larger than seven metres in length.

It’s proposed no vehicle will be permitted to wait within the square “for a period longer than is required to set down or pick up passengers” or exceeding 10 minutes.

Transport and Environment Convener, Councillor Scott Arthur said: “A judicial review was raised and the Committee will consider the matter again to ensure all relevant information is available.”

Councillors will revisit the decision at the transport and environment committee on Thursday, August 15.

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter