

# Cowgate traffic ban delayed by council

**A ban on traffic in Edinburgh's 'dangerous' Cowgate was due be introduced months before a fatal crash on the Old Town street – but was delayed by the council over concerns about funding.**

A 74-year-old man died after being hit by a single-decker bus in Cowgate on Saturday, November 2, in a tragic incident that has shaken the Capital.

Councillors agreed earlier in the year to close the busy street to “some or all through traffic in 2024”. It was initially hoped a “complete closure” would be in place for the start of the summer festivals.

And the latest tragic incident has moved councillors to call for the closure to now be pushed forward “as soon as possible”.

Concerns over “wholly inadequate” pavement widths and pedestrians “spilling onto sometimes heavily-trafficked carriages” in the area were raised in a report to the transport committee in February, which voted to progress an experimental traffic order closing the street to all traffic.

Despite the safety concerns however, the project was delayed in May due to a ‘lack of funding’ and ‘uncertainty over when funding may be secured’.

Funding bids were submitted to Sustrans to take forward the experimental closure of the Cowgate and Lawnmarket but there was a 'high level of uncertainty regarding funding allocations by Transport Scotland to Sustrans, and no certainty as to when funding may be secured, or decisions taken,' councillors were told at the May committee.

Officers said making part of the Cowgate one-way was the "most workable option" to increase pedestrian space in the short term – but the then transport convener Scott Arthur said a "complete closure" was "what the committee is expecting".

Transport committee member Danny Aston said this week it was the "clear will of committee to move forward with solutions," adding: "The sooner we do that the better."

He said: "My thoughts are with the man involved in this tragic incident and his family.

"Nothing has changed for me in the last few months in terms of my view that vehicle access to the Cowgate needs to change as soon as possible. Anyone who spends any time there sees the dangers that pedestrians are subjected to.

"Obviously it's at its worst in August but it's pretty bad all through the year; very narrow pavements, and very often folk spilling out and a lot of them will have had a drink.

"It's clear that things as they stand simply aren't safe."

Police Scotland said: "This was a tragic incident. We are investigating a crash, and our road policing officers, assisted by local officers, are continuing to carry out enquiries."

Amid shocking reports a 'severed head' was found on the street after the incident, police warned people on social media to not share videos and images circulating "which are causing distress to the deceased's family and those viewing them

inadvertently”.

They said “extensive enquiries” were ongoing to establish the full circumstances of the incident, which resulted in the pensioner suffering from catastrophic injuries.

Current Edinburgh transport convener Stephen Jenkinson said the council remained “firmly committed to making our city centre a safer, more welcoming environment for all road users”.

He said: “The proposed improvements to the Cowgate are very much part of our plans.

“I want to express my sincere condolences to the family of the gentleman who died in the tragic incident on the Cowgate over the weekend.

“The circumstances are still unknown and it’s important that we allow the Police to investigate fully before jumping to any conclusions.”

David Hunter from Living Streets, the campaign safer streets, said: “It’s too soon to jump to conclusions about the horrific incident on the Cowgate but what we do know is that it has been a major road safety hazard for years: it was over 20 years ago that traffic was stopped after 10pm because of these known risks.

“The Cowgate can’t be seen in isolation but a plan to reduce traffic or remove it entirely from both the Cowgate – and the Royal Mile is desperately needed.

“This needn’t cost millions.”

Cllr Aston told the meeting in May he was “a little bit baffled about how we got here so quickly from the hopeful days of February”.

He added: “Funding is tight, I understand that. But we were

told these were relatively low-cost interventions. And that instinctively makes sense when you look at the schemes we were looking at.”

Interim director of place Gareth Barwell said: “If you think of the Cowgate what you can see in the update here is the officer view is actually trialling a one-way direction is the way to go.

“The aim of the scheme is to reduce vehicle numbers going down there to make the city centre more pedestrian friendly but then to increase the space that is actually accessible for those people walking and wheeling and the cost in this scheme is broadly narrowing down the carriageway to bring in that available space to drive in.

“But as we found through Spaces for People, putting in some bollards, for example, just to narrow the carriageway, it narrows the carriageway. It doesn’t make it easier if you’re in a wheelchair or you’ve got a pushchair.”

Mr Barwell admitted the council needed to “get better at doing these things in an agile manner”.

But he said it had to be “mindful we’re talking about something in the heart of the Old Town, so it’s very hard to go cheap and nasty when we’re also charged with being the custodians of a World Heritage Site”.

He added: “I think what we need to do as officers is take it away and say in the absence of other funding, then we’ve got to bring it back to this committee and say ‘okay here’s our recommendation on the funding we could use to implement this if we can’t be certain on external funding’.”

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter