

Stourbridge Area Committee - 10th October, 2006

Report of the Director of Law and Property

Proposals for the Closure of Stourbridge High Street to all Traffic except Hackney Carriage and Emergency Vehicles between the hours of 23.00 and 04.00 hours

Purpose of Report

- 1 To consider the proposals for the closure of the High Street Stourbridge Town Centre to all traffic except hackney carriage and emergency vehicles.

Background

2. Stourbridge Town Centre has a significant number of licensed premises that have the ability to serve alcohol into the early hours of the morning. The layout of the Town Centre and the narrowness of the High Street do not easily lend themselves to rapid dispersal of customers leaving these licensed premises.
3. The Town Centre has increasingly attracted significant numbers of young people drawn to its licensed premises, (particularly on a Thursday, Friday and Saturday evening) which in turn has led to large numbers of young people congregating in the Town Centre at the end of the evening filling the footpaths and spilling into the High Street. Added to this problem are large numbers of private hire vehicles, many plying for hire, which block the carriageway and cause hazardous situations for pedestrians while preventing access for emergency vehicles. Often these vehicles are queuing to get into the High Street from the ring road.
4. Private hire vehicles are white saloon vehicles displaying roof signs and blue licence plates. They must be booked through an operator at the taxi base for any journey that they undertake. If private hire vehicles pick up passengers from the street without an office booking they commit the prosecutable offences of plying for hire and of having no insurance. On the other hand, hackney carriage vehicles, (London style cabs), are able to pick passengers up without a prior booking.
5. These factors have resulted in the police experiencing an increase in crime and disorder late at night over the last few years detailed information of which was provided to the Committee on the 3rd July, 2006.

6. A number of meetings have taken place in recent months involving the Police, Officers of the Council and Councillor Angus Adams, the purpose being to consider a variety of initiatives to resolve this problem. One of the options is the introduction of a Special Liquor Licensing Policy regarding the Cumulative Impact in Stourbridge Town Centre which this Committee has resolved to support at the special meeting of the Stourbridge Area Committee on the 3rd July, 2006. Following the consultation period the Licensing and Safety Committee resolved to recommend the introduction of the policy to full Council on the 16th October, 2006.
7. Although the special policy will address the problem of the saturation of premises of licensed premises within the designated area of Stourbridge, (within the ring road), it will not alleviate the dispersal of people and the current blockage of the High Street with both people and predominantly private hire vehicles.
8. On the 25th July, 2006, at a multi-agency meeting it was agreed that proposals to close Stourbridge High Street to all vehicles but hackney carriages and emergency vehicles between the hours of 10.00pm and 4.00am, be explored further. The proposal will allow private hire vehicles to pick up their booked passengers in Lower High Street, and the use of Taxi Marshals to assist the Police and Licensing Enforcement in implementing the scheme is under active consideration.
9. Councillor Doreen Ameson and Councillor Adrian Turner, Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Taxis Committee, attended a meeting with representatives of the hackney carriage and private hire trade on the 15th August 2006 to discuss the proposals. The trade made the following points for consideration by the Stourbridge Group; -
 - Restrict only public vehicles from parking and entering Stourbridge High Street
 - Reduce the restriction period to commence at either 11.00pm or 11.30pm.
 - Restrict public parking in Upper High Street and allow private hire vehicles to park near to the Crown Centre and beyond.
 - Allow private hire vehicles to act as hackney carriages within the restricted time.
10. Subsequent to this meeting a petition has been handed in responding to the following points: -
 - It will be a great loss to business
 - There will be traffic jams on the ring road and could cause serious accidents.

- You will have to walk to the pick up point for pre-booked taxis, which is at the lower high street, which is a great distance for people who are drunk.
- Customers will get frustrated and will cause violence.
- There will be more traffic in the lower high street and cause problems for the business' there due to the closure of the Upper high Street.

A mixture of private hire drivers and the public signed the petition.

11. These points were considered at a meeting of the Stourbridge Group which included Councillor Turner on the 29th August 2006 when it was agreed that the proposed commencement time for the closure of Stourbridge High Street should be 11.00pm. The other proposals made by the trade were not considered acceptable.
12. On the 31st August 2006 the Licensing Officer wrote to all hackney carriage and private hire drivers outlining the proposals and inviting their comments. We are currently awaiting the written comments from the representatives of the private hire trade.
13. The proposals have been formulated by Councillor Angus Adams, Inspector Boardman and Sergeant Tony Osborne of the West Midlands Police, Graham Isherwood Head of Traffic and Road Safety, Philip Tart Assistant Director Legal and Democratic Services, Janet Elliott Licensing Officer and Mathew Caddick Stourbridge Town Centre Manager.
14. The proposals are designed to allow hackney carriage vehicles to park on Taxi Ranks in the high street and create a free flow of these vehicles enabling them to leave the High Street with their customers in an orderly and safe manner. Private hire vehicles will park in Lower High Street to await their booked fares and Taxi Marshals, Licensing Enforcement Officers and Police will assist the public by directing them to the Taxi Ranks or to Lower High Street to pick up their booked private hire vehicles. There will be posters, leaflets and notice boards, both in licensed premises and in the High Street area, displaying the telephone numbers to ring for the booking of private hire vehicles and the scheme will be widely publicised before implementation. It is proposed to implement the scheme for an initial 6 months trial period when it will be reviewed for its effectiveness and long term viability.
15. The Councils' Traffic and Road Safety Division will be responsible for the advertising of notices and signage for the: -
 - Prohibition of vehicles between 11.00pm and 4.00am in High Street and Market Street Stourbridge with the exception of hackney carriages and emergency vehicles.
 - Restriction of waiting between 11.00pm – 4.00am, except for hackney carriages in the South East half of Stourbridge High Street.

The Principal Highways Officer has advised that the above prohibitions should apply 7 days per week, as it will lead to considerable confusion for the public and private hire drivers if they were to apply only on certain days.

16. The Licensing Officer has explored funding for the Taxi Marshals with the Councils' Community Safety Team and specifically the Joint Activities Group. On the 22nd September 2006 The Commissioning Officer Community Safety reported that application may be made to the government for £6000 and that there is a possibility that the Joint Activities Group could also make a contribution. These funding options are being actively pursued.
17. The Police are also actively seeking funding from licensed premises in Stourbridge Town Centre for the appointment of the Taxi Marshals.
18. The Licensing Officer together with the councils' publicity team will be responsible for publicising the scheme to the public.
19. It is anticipated that the Christmas period will provide major challenges in terms of policing the Town Centre area and therefore commencement of the trial scheme by December 2006 is considered to be essential.
20. Representatives from the Police, the Councils' Highways Division, Town Centre Management and Law and Property Directorate will be present at the meeting to answer any questions that the committee and members of the public may have.
21. These proposals falls within the Council's responsibilities for both liquor and private hire and hackney carriage licensing which have a direct link to the Council's key corporate priority that safety matters.

Finance

22. Specific funding is being sought for the cost of employing Taxi Marshals .The publicity costs and Licensing Enforcement Officers will be met out of the Licensing budget.

Law

23. The Licensing Act 2003 governs liquor Licensing
24. The licensing of Hackney Carriages is governed by The Town and Police Clauses Act of 1847 and The Local Government Miscellaneous Provisions Act 1976
25. The licensing of Private Hire Vehicles is governed by The Local Government Act 1976.
26. Road Traffic Orders are made under Section 1 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1967.

Equality Impact

- 27. This report takes into account the Council's policy on equal opportunities
- 28. The proposals will impact equally on all racial groups.
- 29. The proposals will impact on children and young persons through their attendance at licensed premises.
- 30. There will be consultation and involvement of young people through Dudley Youth Service.

Recommendation

- 31. That the Area Committee consider and comment on the proposals outlined in this report.

John Poyman

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DIRECTOR OF LAW AND PROPERTY

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List of Background Papers

None