

STOURBRIDGE AREA COMMITTEE – SPECIAL MEETING

Tuesday 10th October, 2006 at 7.00 pm
at Hob Green Primary School, Hob Green Road, Stourbridge

PRESENT:-

Councillor Adams (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs Cowell (Vice Chairman)
Councillors Banks, Mrs Collins, Donegan, Jones, Kettle, Knowles, Lowe,
Mrs Martin, Rogers, A Turner and C Wilson; Mr G Downing and Mr I Green

OFFICERS:-

Director of Law and Property (as Area Liaison Officer), Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services, Licensing Officer (Directorate of Law and Property), Senior Engineer, Traffic and the Stourbridge Town Centre Manager (Directorate of the Urban Environment) Group Accountant (Directorate of Finance, ICT and Procurement) and Mrs J Rees (Directorate of Law and Property)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:-

Inspector P Boardman, Sergeants S Dalton and A Osborne (West Midlands Police) were in attendance at the meeting, together with approximately 40 members of the public.

41

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Councillors Attwood and Mrs Walker.

42

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Jones declared a prejudicial interest in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, in respect of Agenda Item No. 3 (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 on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays) in view of his close personal friendship with a member of the public directly affected by the proposals.

Councillor Jones withdrew from the meeting whilst this matter was considered.

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 (ON THURSDAYS, FRIDAYS AND SATURDAYS)

A report of the Director of Law and Property was submitted on proposals for the introduction of special traffic management measures for Stourbridge High Street between the hours of 11 pm and 4 am (on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays) to prohibit all traffic, except Hackney Carriage and Emergency Vehicles parking in the High Street during the times stated.

In presenting the report, the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services stated that the proposals, as contained within the report submitted, had come about following concerns expressed by the Police for public safety and difficulties they were experiencing in dispersing crowds in Stourbridge High Street, particularly on weekend evenings, following the significant increase in the number of licensed premises in close proximity to the Ring Road area and also because of the narrowness of the upper section of the High Street. He indicated that representatives of the Hackney Carriage Trade and the Taxi Focus Group, were in attendance at the meeting and would express their views on the proposals.

Recently, a number of meetings had taken place involving the Chairman of the Stourbridge Area Committee, officers of the Council, the Police, representatives of the Private Hire and Hackney Carriage trade, and members of the Taxis Committee. The purpose being to consider possible alternatives to address the escalating problems related to disorderly conduct and anti social behaviour in the Stourbridge High Street area, which had increased since the introduction of the new Liquor Licensing Act, 2003. One of the options considered had been the introduction of a special liquor licensing policy regarding the cumulative impact of licensed premises in Stourbridge Town Centre. This special policy would not however alleviate the dispersal of people and the current blockage of the High Street caused by large volumes of people and predominantly private hire vehicles.

Following initial discussions, a petition against the proposals of over 450 signatures, including those of private hire vehicle owners and the public, was presented, the contents of which had been considered by the Stourbridge Group. As a result of the consultation with the Private Hire and Hackney Carriage trade, it had been agreed that the start time for the implementation of the traffic measures could be altered from 10 pm to 11 pm.

The Assistant Director advised that although all Hackney Carriage and Private Hire vehicle owners had been written to regarding the proposals, no written comments had been received. He acknowledged the need for the public to be reminded of the important differences between hackney carriages and private hire vehicles in terms of the need to pre book private hire vehicles. There would be a need for taxi marshals to be on duty to facilitate the smooth running of the proposals and ensure people ordering private hire vehicles were directed to the correct vehicle. The cost of the

traffic marshals would be part funded by some of the licensees in Stourbridge during the proposed trial period of 6 months.

A visual presentation was given on behalf of the West Midlands Police showing incidents which had taken place on the previous weekend, in the early hours of the morning and showing the traffic congestion and large crowds of young people, spilling into the road due to the narrowness of the pavement, which made it extremely difficult, and at times impossible, for emergency vehicles to gain access to and from the High Street and for the Police to disperse the crowds.

The presentation showed Private Hire Vehicles at a stand still in the High Street totally blocking the road, and waiting for customers, many of whom had not booked the fare. It also showed a Private Hire Vehicle parked in the designated hackney carriage bay. Over two thousand young people were shown congregated at around 2 am and the Police advised that this number could double within the following two hours.

The Senior Engineer, Traffic, explained the legal process to be gone through to introduce the Traffic Regulation Order to control movement and parking of vehicles, which would include consultation with Ward Members and the public; a report back on any objection received, arising from the consultation and the consequential public notice; the advertising of the approved proposal following the signing of a decision sheet by the Cabinet Member for Transportation.

Following the presentations, members of the public responded as follows:-

- (a) A written query was received, expressing concern at the cost of the introduction of the proposals and asking whether the venue owners could be persuaded to recompense the Council and the Police for their assistance. A second written query asked who would pay for the required taxi marshals once the proposals were in place. Both of the written questions had been addressed by the presentations and needed no further comments.
- (b) A petition was submitted by residents of Lower High Street, Stourbridge, objecting to the proposals and expressing concerns that the proposals would lead to noise nuisance to residents in the early hours of the morning. The petition was referred to the Director of Law and Property and the Director of the Urban Environment for consideration.
- (c) In response to the concerns contained within the petition, Inspector Boardman advised that consideration had been given to the effect of the proposals on the residents of Lower High Street, together with the impact on police resources. However, there was an urgent need to find a solution to the safe dispersal of traffic and people in the High Street. It was envisaged that the proposals would reduce the number of people waiting in queues for transport home, as they would be transported home as soon as the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Vehicles arrived, picked them up and departed.

- (d) The Chairman pointed out that the proposals, if introduced, would initially be for a trial period. If a problem arose during the trial period, the situation would be reviewed as a matter of urgency.
- (e) A representative of the Private Hire Drivers' Association commented on its members' willingness to work closely with the Police to arrive at an agreeable solution. He made a suggestion of using the Wilkinson car park as an alternative to moving the Private Hire Vehicles to Lower High Street.
- (f) In response to a query as to how the public would know which Traffic Regulation Order was in effect, without the need to use different coloured signs on different days, the Senior Engineer, Traffic advised that it would be possible to advertise a number of options to see which was the preferred option.
- (g) A representative of the residents of Lower High Street commented that they wished to object strongly to the moving of Private Hire Vehicles to Lower High Street, on the grounds that it could lead to at least 250 extra vehicles being located in the area outside of residents' properties. The suggestion of using Wilkinson or B & Q car parks would be more preferable.
- (h) A suggestion was made that the Council's car parks on Birmingham Road could be used for the Private Hire Vehicles, but it was noted this would entail the crowds walking further than at present.
- (i) In response to a question of how many police officers were based in Stourbridge, it was reported that this could vary from 6 to 10, depending on the shift systems of working. The shift pattern allowed for an overlap of staff to cope with difficulties at problematic times.
- (j) Concerns were expressed at the cost of taxi marshals and over who would bear these costs.

The Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services advised that some of the licensed bars in Stourbridge had agreed to contribute towards the cost of taxi marshals during the trial period. He pointed out that the current problems had not been caused by the Council granting additional licences to premises, but the principle of the Licensing Act 2003, which was that a more flexible approach to hours of opening for the sale of alcohol would lead to less binge drinking and a more gradual dispersal of people leaving licensed premises. In the case of Stourbridge this has not proved to be the case. Under the terms of the Licensing Act 2003, the Council had no option other than to grant a licence if no objections to an application had been received, and in the case of the new bars in Stourbridge, no objections had been received.

- (k) Concerns were expressed that vulnerable people in other parts of Stourbridge did not receive a prompt response from the police, on account of officers being placed in the Town Centre trouble spots.

In response to this Inspector Boardman advised that all calls were monitored and responded to when received.

- (l) Inspector Boardman confirmed that visitors from neighbouring towns visited Stourbridge on a regular basis, and that the number of outside visitors was increasing.

- (m) In response to a query as to increased litter and graffiti, and how it was paid for, the Stourbridge Town Centre Manager advised that funding for all litter collection came from existing budgets. Recently the recruitment of an additional member of staff had been advertised to deal with the additional litter at weekends.

The Town Centre Manager confirmed that, if residents requested the removal of graffiti from their property, which was probably caused by young people, rather than late night revellers, the Council would undertake this work, once a consent form was signed by the resident.

- (n) In response to a query from a resident as to whether it was true that the whole of the High Street was to be closed in the future, the Chairman advised that this was only a rumour.

- (o) In response to a query as to what benefit the Council gained from the increase in licensed premises, the Chairman advised that licensed venues within the Stourbridge area were for the benefit of local residents who used the venues and not the Council. Traders benefited from additional visitors spending money in the town.

- (p) Some members of the public expressed concern that the proposals were only relocating the problem to a different part of the town and that residents of Lower High Street would not wish for the type of incidents, as shown on the visual presentation, to be taking place outside their homes.

In response to this, Inspector Boardman advised that he had listened to all the views expressed and that in his view the proposals would result in easier and quicker dispersal of the crowds. He considered that there would not necessarily be an increase in the number of Private Hire Vehicles, as the Private Hire Vehicles should enter the area to pick up a fare and then leave promptly.

- (q) A representative of the Hackney Carriage Association advised that currently hackney carriages were not always able to park in the designated rank, due to other vehicles being parked there.

During the Member discussion the following views were expressed:

- (i) One Member had visited the High Street in the early hours of the morning recently with the Police. He had witnessed people walking over the new pedestrian crossing, ignoring the traffic. There were queues in the High Street waiting for a cab and there appeared to be not enough taxis available to transport all the people home.
- (ii) The large numbers of people visiting Stourbridge was a success story and should be seen as such. In the main the police did a good job. A suggestion of a “dolbus system” to take people to other areas was made.
- (iii) Concern was expressed at the number of youngsters lying in the road intoxicated, thus making travel by emergency vehicles virtually impossible.
- (iv) Concern was expressed that 11 pm may not be late enough for the proposed measures to commence, as some visitors to the Town for concerts or shows in the Town Hall could still be in the Town at this time.
- (v) Support was expressed for a trial to see whether the proposals would work in practice.
- (vi) The difficult position the Council now found itself in was the fault of the Government, through the introduction of the Licensing Act, 2003. If the trial proposal did not work, another solution would need to be sought.
- (vii) Although appreciative of the concerns expressed, some Members were opposed to the closure of the High Street. It was felt that many people had a legitimate reason for being in the Town late at night and should be allowed the freedom to go about their business. It was acknowledged that the use of Wilkinson and/or B & Q car parks, along with Council owned car parks should be explored. There was a strong need for taxi marshals to ensure safety of people and for co-operation from the Police in taking action against drivers who break the law by parking illegally.
- (viii) One Member expressed the view that the Council should be encouraging people to come to live in the Town, which if faced with disorder and anti social behaviour, they would not wish to do.
- (ix) A Member expressed concern that the proposals would affect visitors to the Crystal Leisure Centre, who parked their cars in the lower half of Upper High Street and would not be leaving the Town until after 11 pm and therefore would be

concerned as to whether they would be allowed to move their cars after this time.

- (x) The legal status of taxi marshals was questioned.
- (xi) If Private Hire Vehicles picked up people from the top end of the Lower High Street, this would ensure people were kept away from the residential part of the Lower High Street. It was pointed out that any Private Hire Vehicle owner could apply for a hackney carriage licence. Vehicles for hackney carriage hire needed to be suitable to accommodate people with disabilities, and a wheelchair, if necessary.
- (xii) Private Hire Vehicles, when parked waiting for fares that were not booked, were acting illegally. They should be aware of the law, and if they did not abide by it, be prosecuted.
- (xiii) Some members commented on the need for the restrictions to take place with immediate effect, rather than wait for the busy Christmas period.
- (xiv) It was important that emergency vehicles were able to gain access to the High Street.
- (xv) One Member expressed the view that using the B & Q and/or Wilkinson car parks would cause more danger, with the possibility of people intoxicated with liquor walking or falling into travelling traffic on the Ring Road. Licensed bars agreeing to fund taxi marshals should be praised and named, giving credit where credit was due.
- (xvi) A representative of the Stourbridge Chamber queried whether traders, or their representatives would be able to gain access to their premises if called out to an alarm by the Police during the early hours of the morning. In response to this, Inspector Boardman advised that in this situation the vehicle would be classed as an emergency service and therefore would be allowed access.
- (xv) The Chairman advised that all comments would be taken into consideration and suggestions fully investigated before any action was taken. In the interest of public safety something had to be done to ensure the quick, smooth and safe dispersal of traffic and crowds from the Town Centre. He reiterated the point that the proposals, as set out in the report, were for a trial period of 6 months initially. If the scheme did not work, it would be possible to change it at any time and reconsider what alternative action could be taken. He confirmed that Travel West Midlands had been asked if they would be willing to run late night services to return people to their homes, but had so far expressed no

wish to do so. Other companies were being contacted on this matter.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the Cabinet Member for Transportation be advised of the comments of the Committee, as indicated above.
- (2) That the Cabinet Member for Transportation be advised of the Committee's support for a 6 months' trial of the proposals for the introduction of special traffic management measures for Stourbridge High Street, to enable the closure of the Stourbridge High Street to all traffic except Hackney Carriage and Emergency Vehicles between the hours of 23.00 and 04.00 hours on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, subject to the proviso that should any problems be encountered, there will be an opportunity for the Committee to review the proposal.

44

DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

RESOLVED

That the dates of future meetings, as set out in the agenda, be noted.

The meeting ended at 8.45p.m.

CHAIRMAN