

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE: Licensing

DATE: 6 June 2012

DIRECTOR: Stewart Carruth

TITLE OF REPORT: Review of the Operation of Night Time Ranks and Closed Ranks

REPORT NUMBER: CG/12/046

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of the report is to provide the Committee with further information from key stakeholders and recommendations regarding its review of the operation of the night time ranks and closed ranks, in light of the information and recommendations in the Taxi Demand Survey ("the Survey") by the Transport Research Institute, Taxi Studies Group, Edinburgh Napier University ("the consultants").

2. RECOMMENDATION(S)

It is recommended that the Committee:

- a) declines the request, from the Taxi Consultation Group taxi trade representatives, to reopen certain daytime ranks at night time;
- b) instructs officers of Environment, Planning and Infrastructure to investigate the possibility of creating further rank space for taxis at the existing night time ranks;
- c) instructs officers of Environment, Planning and Infrastructure and Legal and Democratic Services, if it is possible to create further rank space, to commence the consultation and statutory procedures and report back to both the Environment, Planning and Infrastructure and Licensing Committees as required; and
- d) instructs officers of Environment, Planning and Infrastructure to ensure that signage at Back Wynd and the Union Street night time ranks is clearly visible and easily understood (as an addition to the Committee's instructions regarding rank signage in terms of the Survey Rank Specific Recommendations report).

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

If the Committee agrees the above recommendations the main implementation costs are associated with officer time carrying out statutory procedures. There will also be minor cost implications

regarding delineating any extended rank(s) and reviewing signage. The cost can be met within existing budget.

4. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

Policy Background- In 2009 the Civic Forum held various meetings whereby it was recognised that action was required to address problems with public safety in the city centre at night time. Soon thereafter the Community Safety Partnership established and developed the City Centre Action Plan, which led to the creation of the Night Time Transport Zone Policy (Night Time Ranks/Transport Marshals).

Declining the request from the trade representatives would continue to support: a) the effective operation of the night time ranks; b) the Council and partner agencies' policy strategies to address the problem of antisocial and violent behaviour in the city centre; and c) Council and partner agencies' spending to achieve and maintain these policy goals.

On the contrary agreement to the trade request would work against the positive benefits to the city's safety record and reputation, which in large part result from the current night time ranks arrangement.

5. BACKGROUND/MAIN ISSUES

a) Taxi Consultation Group- Trade Representatives' Request

The taxi trade representatives have requested that the current night time rank provision is amended, as follows: i) Back Wynd being used as a feeder for the night time rank outside St Nicholas Kirkyard; and, ii) the Bridge Street rank moved to Union Street (at Union Bridge West) as a fifth night time rank.

b) General Background

In the recent past Aberdeen has been the subject of negative press coverage, in relation to public safety, particularly in the city centre at night time.

As a response to these public safety concerns, the Council implemented its Night Time Transport Zone Policy. A key strand in that policy was the formation of night time ranks on Union Street, which every day between the hours of 00:00 to 05:00 replace the day time ranks. The night time ranks benefit from bright street lighting and higher specification CCTV coverage, which is monitored by Police operatives. Three of the ranks are monitored by Transport Marshals every weekend night and on occasional additional nights when a high demand is anticipated.

The night time ranks introduction, along with supporting multi agency measures (see Police letter, appendix 2), has significantly improved

public safety and the public perception of safety in the city centre at night time, which also has a positive impact for the night time economy.

To agree to open day time (side ranks) at night time as suggested by the TCG trade representatives would be a retrograde step in maintaining the standard of public safety. It would also lead to confusion amongst the public as to where to queue for taxis. These are precisely the problems the measure has been successful in addressing.

i. Night time taxi ranks -

The night time taxi ranks were introduced on Union Street on 12 September 2008 as a targeted measure carried out as part of the Night Time Transport Zone initiative, to improve driver and public safety. This proved successful and is popular with the taxi trade and the public.

Due to their success and following requests from the taxi trade, the Committee decided to introduce a fourth night time rank at the Castlegate on 17 September 2011. At the same time it decided to operate all of the night time ranks 7 days a week (between the hours of 00:00 to 05:00) to create greater consistency on the operating times of the ranks for the benefit of both the public and taxi drivers.

The changes were subject to consultation at various stages and were advertised by widespread publicity at significant expense.

No complaints have been received from members of the public regarding night time ranks since the current arrangement was implemented.

ii. Closed Ranks -

At its meeting on 1 June 2011 the Committee resolved to approve the following variation of condition to the taxi driver's licence: "At any time when any designated taxi rank is closed the driver of a taxi shall not park, stop his taxi, ply for hire or otherwise canvass or importune for employment at that closed taxi rank".

The condition has the effect that a taxi driver picking up at a closed rank is committing an offence, punishable by a maximum fine of £1000. The proposed condition was intended to resolve the problem of continued misuse of closed ranks by clarifying the position for taxi drivers and enabling the police to take enforcement action against drivers who breached the condition.

Initially the Police charged some taxi drivers who breached the condition. However, it appears that the majority comply and only utilise ranks at the appropriate times.

The Taxi Demand Survey of November 2011 and more recent information from the Police (see appendix 2) suggests that the provisions now appear to be working well, with the public aware of the location of night time ranks and using them regularly.

c) Taxi Demand Survey Observations on Night Ranks & Closed Ranks

The consultants were asked to review the operation of the night time ranks and the closed ranks. A summary of their findings is attached at Appendix 1.

Synopsis of Survey Evidence - The night time ranks serve the public well, as they can hire a taxi from them relatively easily, even at peak times. The Survey evidence confirms that the night time ranks are currently operating efficiently and are meeting their primary purpose, which is to provide safe (centrally located) taxi ranks, especially for the patrons of licensed premises in the city centre. The Survey evidence also advises that the taxi trade benefits from i) the greater safety at these ranks, and also ii) because they are well used by the public.

The consultants only suggested minor amendments to the existing night time ranks, mainly in relation to signage. The Committee has already instructed implementation of these recommendations.

d) Specialist Consultees

i. Grampian Police- City Centre Policing Team

The Police recommend that the operation of the night ranks remains as the status quo. Their response is attached at appendix 2(1).

They have very positive views of the current night time ranks arrangement, which has resulted in increased community safety for the public, taxi drivers, residents and businesses. The Police advise that “confidence in the use of the (sic night time) taxi ranks appears to be increasing, evidenced by the diverse range of persons using same, whereas before they were mainly used by young adults after nights out”.

Reopening the side ranks in addition to the night time ranks may result in a decrease in public safety and increase the requirements placed on the Police to patrol these ranks as they are located off Union Street and would no longer be served by Transport Marshals. The Police letter advises that “without this (sic night time ranks/Transport Marshals) and other initiatives, as a partnership we would not have achieved the reduction in serious assaults and antisocial behaviour within the City Centre”.

ii. Community Safety (Aberdeen City Council)

Community Safety recommends that the operation of the night time ranks and closed ranks remains as the status quo. The Community Safety response is attached at appendix 2(2).

They advise that “as a result of the interventions delivered through Aberdeen Community Safety Partnership and collaboratively with many stakeholders there is strong evidence that the City Centre has become safer and has a far more positive image than previously... the closing of ranks off Union Street and use of night time ranks with additional safety arrangements has been a vital action in bringing about such positive change”.

Community Safety also advises that “the proposal to open ranks adjacent to Union Street creates an unacceptable and unnecessary safety risk to the public”.

iii. Transportation, Strategy and Programmes (Enterprise, Planning & Infrastructure, Aberdeen City Council)

TSP recommends that the operation of the night time ranks and closed ranks remains as the status quo.

“The Night Time Transport Zone has the aim of grouping *“public transport options into a centralised transport zone that is well lit, policed and monitored. Transport should be easily recognised and used, providing quick transfers out of the City Centre. This should enable policing to take place with minimum impact to resources in surrounding areas and enable the transfer of customers to areas outside the City Centre with reduced impact on residential areas.”* (extract from the Night Time Transport Study report presented to the Licensing Committee on 16 January 2008.)

Since its implementation this Zone has been monitored and year-on-year improvements have been made to the taxi provisions following feedback from taxi groups, Grampian Police and members of the public, with the intention of improving conditions for those visiting and working in the city centre at night. The introduction of the Night Time Transport Zone has contributed to the reduced number of reported incidents within the city centre, making it safer for all. “

6. IMPACT

Corporate – Various Community Safety and multi agency policies are supported by the night time taxi ranks.

Public - This report is likely to be of interest to the public, as it relates to taxi rank provision in the city centre at night time. It also has an impact in terms of the safety of the public whilst waiting at ranks.

Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessment – An Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessment was required as the request from the taxi trade representatives may have a disproportionately negative impact on disabled taxi passengers.

The consultants advised that the night ranks on Union Street appear to be well located and have sufficient width of pavement for use by wheelchair passengers. This can be contrasted with the side rank on Back Wynd, which is less appropriate for wheelchair passengers as it has cobbles and a narrow pavement, which prohibits nearside loading.

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

City of Aberdeen Taxi Demand Survey, by TRI (Transport Research Institute, Taxi Studies Group, Edinburgh Napier University)

8. REPORT AUTHOR DETAILS

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(1) Taxi Demand Survey Observations and Subsequent Committee Actions- Rank Locations

Back Wynd – At the time of the Taxi Demand Survey in October/November 2011 it appeared that members of the public still occasionally waited at this rank, at or after midnight when it is closed. The consultants suggested that better signage would assist with the changeover to night time ranks and this, amongst other measures, has been progressed by the Committee through its Rank Specific Recommendations report.

Bridge St –Taxi trade representatives requested that the rank on Bridge Street be closed and moved to Union Street.

The consultants advised that the Bridge St rank was used very seldomly and suggested that use of a side street as a night rank appeared to be less effective than a Union Street location. They therefore recommended closing the rank in favour of the more popular ranks on Union Street. The consultants also suggested that a night time rank could perhaps be created on Union Street (Union Bridge) to the east of Bridge Street

After the night rank operating times were amended to 7 days a week the Bridge St rank was actually only in operation for 1 hour each day, 05:00 to 06:00. The Committee therefore decided to revoke the rank.

The Committee decided not to introduce a replacement night time rank on Union Bridge to the east of Bridge Street. That decision was based on the advice of Grampian Police and officers of Enterprise, Planning and Infrastructure who advised that the location was unsuitable for a rank as there was insufficient space at the proposed location which is between two sets of traffic lights (Bridge Street/Union Street junction and Primark/Belmont Street).

Union Street at Castlegate – The consultants advised that this rank generally performs well as a night time rank. In contrast to the other night time ranks it has no Transport Marshals. The addition of Transport Marshals may assist with passenger queuing and taxi movements at the rank.

The rank is co-located at a bus stop. This has the benefit that the rank is well lit and has a shelter for passengers. Although, when buses stop at the rank it causes difficulty for taxis who wish to stop in the same spaces. The consultants advised that this is a minor problem as buses only stop for short periods of time.

The consultants suggested amending a blue directional sign at the rank. This already has been progressed by the Committee through its Rank Specific Recommendations report.

Union Street at Correction Wynd – The consultants advised that the rank appears to be well used and effective as a night time rank.

It is very popular with members of the public and taxi movements to and from the rank are efficient and well organised. This is mainly due to the presence of Transport Marshals (at weekends only), good signage and Police support.

The consultants explained that buses waiting at the bus stop behind the rank block the line of sight for taxis who wish to stop at the rank. However, they advise it is a minor problem, which the Transport Marshals solve by directing taxis around the buses.

As this is the busiest of the night ranks, if possible, it would be appropriate to extend the rank waiting area for taxis.

Union Street at Summer Street – The consultants advised that this rank appears to be well used and effective as a night rank.

The rank is served by Transport Marshals (at weekends only) and has good signage. There is little conflict with buses waiting nearby as they only wait for a short time and the rank is well served by taxis.

Union Street at Bon Accord Street - The consultants also advised that this rank appears to be well used and effective as a night rank.

The rank is served by Transport Marshals (at weekends only) and has good signage.

(2) Individual Taxi Drivers- Survey Responses to (Electronic/Postal) Consultation

The consultants received responses from a number of individual taxi drivers.

The response was mixed with some suggesting that the night ranks were not required during the week whereas others thought they should continue to operate during the week as it provided greater consistency to the public and drivers.

(3) Taxi Operator Panels- Focus Group Meetings

The consultants also set up focus group meetings with taxi operator panels (taxi/ private hire car licences).

The views expressed by these groups were contrary to the trade representatives on the Taxi Consultation Group. They did not have concerns about the night ranks functioning 7 days a week. In their opinion, despite some initial confusion when the ranks began operating 7 days a week, the operating hours of the ranks had become well known by the public and should not be altered back (i.e. side ranks reopened).

This group was of the view that the procedures for switchover from daytime to night time ranks should be reviewed. In their opinion this could be achieved by the Committee providing more information to the public regarding the changeover to the night ranks each night at midnight.

The consultants suggested that the best way to address this would be to: a) ensure that signage for the night ranks and closed ranks is clearly visible to the public; and b) use standard language on the signs. The signs directing members of the public to the open ranks must point in the right direction. These matters have already been addressed by the Committee through its Rank Specific Recommendations report.

(4) Public/Passenger Perceptions

Members of the public advised that they use taxi ranks regularly. They prefer centrally located ranks with a high level of taxi supply. Such ranks increase the likelihood of them using taxi services. The Union Street night time ranks meet both of these criteria, which was noted by the public in their responses.

Other factors such as bright rank lighting and the presence of Transport Marshals also increases the likelihood of members of the public using a taxi rank. Members of the public advised that this is because these factors improve safety, which also makes people feel safer. Both Transport Marshals and bright lighting are safety features of the Union Street night time ranks.

1) Response from Grampian Police, City Centre Policing Team



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Dear Paul

ABERDEEN CITY CENTRE - NIGHT TIME TRANSPORT

I refer to your e-mail message of 25 April 2012 requesting comment from Grampian Police with regard to the above subject and in particular the impact of the night time taxi ranks to the City Centre.

You will be aware that in recent years Aberdeen City Centre had previously earned the unfair reputation as being one of the most violent and 'unsafe' City Centres in Scotland. This 'accolade' was regularly played out in the media both locally and nationally attracting comment that the City Centre was unsafe due to the level of violence, particularly at weekends.

In response to the situation during late 2006 Grampian Police, in partnership with Aberdeen City Council, launched Operation Oak. In summary this was a coordinated partnership approach led by Grampian Police, which represented a firm commitment by community and statutory partners to work together to achieve positive outcomes in respect of the various problems, perceived or otherwise, within the City Centre of Aberdeen.

From a policing perspective, it was acknowledged that this relatively small area accounted for a significant proportion of crimes/offences for Grampian Police, particularly in respect of violence and antisocial behaviour, much of which was fuelled by alcohol.

Since the introduction of Operation Oak and as a result of the constantly evolving partnerships and interventions that have followed e.g. the Night Time taxi ranks, the reputation of Aberdeen City Centre has been transformed to the extent that it has been recognised as one of the safest City Centres in the United Kingdom.

2.

In considering the effectiveness of the night time taxi ranks, it should be noted that the Grampian Police CCTV Unit are responsible for monitoring public space CCTV cameras in the City Centre. They provide 24 hour coverage, monitoring 94 cameras in the City Centre, responding to incidents brought to their attention by staff from the day time and night time economies via digital radio 'Shop Safe' and 'Pub Watch' networks. This continual flow of information between City Centre businesses and the Police CCTV Unit is an excellent example of partners working together to keep Aberdeen City Centre safe.

In consultation with Grampian Police, on 12 September 2008 Aberdeen City Council introduced the night time taxi ranks to the City Centre. These new ranks were located on Union Street with additional signing, road lines and specially lit poles introduced denoting the location of the ranks. The ranks commence at midnight each evening and during weekends trained transport marshals are deployed to the ranks to manage persons queuing for taxis.

The initial decision to move the taxi ranks from the side streets to Union Street was due to the side streets i.e. Back Wynd, Chapel Street and Hadden Street having high incidents of violence and antisocial behaviour linked to persons waiting at taxi ranks. Incidents often occurred as a result of persons who were under the influence of alcohol becoming aggressive, them not waiting in lengthy and unmanaged queues, leading to verbal and often violent confrontations taking place.

The side street ranks were areas which had poor street lighting and limited CCTV coverage. Some of the side streets did have new street lamps installed, however these were fitted below the CCTV camera, consequently reducing the quality of footage available on CCTV due to the glare from the lights. In contrast, following the introduction of the night time ranks, a concentrated effort has been made to improve street lighting on Union Street. Furthermore the thirteen CCTV cameras on Union Street were prioritised for improvement as part of upgrade work recently completed.

Prior to the introduction of the night time ranks, during weekend policing operations, Officers were deployed to taxi ranks to prevent and quell disorderly behaviour. When an incident took place at or near the taxi rank, Officers were then removed to deal with custodies leaving the taxi ranks unattended. Consequently incidents would thereafter occur which CCTV operators often only caught the 'tail-end' of with limited information as to the identity of those involved. The incidents of violence which took place at ranks increased perception of the city centre as being unsafe and the ranks on the side streets as a place to be avoided.

The introduction of the night time ranks, supported by the transport marshals has been the most significant step forward which the partnership have made to enhancing the overall safety of the City Centre. These new ranks are located in areas which are well lit, are clearly monitored by CCTV and staffed by marshals trained to Security Industry Authority standard. They have been bench marked by other Local Authorities from across Scotland who have been impressed by their operation and the partnership working which is in place.

3.

I can personally speak to the professionalism of the taxi marshals who I have found to be friendly, polite and to act as excellent ambassadors for the City. They work closely with Police and Street Pastors at weekends to manage the taxi queues and address poor behaviour when it occurs. The marshals are provided with 'Pub Watch' radios which provide a direct link to the Police CCTV, allowing them to quickly alert Police when an incident occurs.

From analysis of violent crime in Aberdeen City Centre, there has been a continued decrease in the number of Serious Assaults, from 2008 when there were 93 incidents to 66 incidents reported to Police in 2011 (reduction of 29%). Similarly in 2008 there were 1317 crimes of Breach of the Peace reported to Grampian Police, compared with 719 incidents reported in 2011 (reduction of 45%). Unfortunately there has been an increase in the number of petty assaults reported, a matter which the Local Policing Team and wider partners are working to address.

Further initiatives including the introduction of Street Pastors and a night time bus service, supplemented by bus marshals, continue to enhance the feeling of well being and overall safety of the City Centre, and in the process ensuring that persons leaving the area are provided with a safe, swift and efficient means of getting home.

As one of the Inspectors with responsibility for policing the City Centre, I have received positive feedback from members of the public using the service, from taxi drivers and from local businesses. Furthermore confidence in the use of the taxi ranks appears to be increasing evidenced by the diverse range of persons using same, where as before they were mainly used by young adults after nights out.

Finally I am of the opinion that the improvements made to the location and management of the taxi ranks has encouraged taxi drivers to work within the City Centre at weekends, greatly assisting in the dispersal of persons from licensed premises. Without this and other initiatives, as a partnership we would not have achieved the reduction in serious assaults and antisocial behaviour within the City Centre which we have to date.

I hope that you find the aforementioned information useful. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require clarification on any of the points raised.



Iain MacLelland
Inspector
City Centre Local Policing Team

2) Submission from Community Safety (Aberdeen City Council)

“**ABERDEEN CITY CENTRE**”

In 2006 it became highly apparent to the Council and its community safety partners that there were relatively high levels of violence, disorder and antisocial behaviour in the City Centre associated with the night-time economy. In addition to Aberdeen City Council and Grampian Police receiving calls of complaints about the city centre, other stakeholders and elected members also expressed concern about the safety of the community and those working, socialising and visiting Aberdeen City Centre at evening times. There was extensive negative media reporting of the problems which was giving the City Centre a poor reputation both locally and nationally.

Grampian Police launched its Operation Oak to work in partnership with relevant services improve City Centre safety. The community planning partnership instructed that a partnership strategy be developed and implemented to reduce alcohol fuelled violence.

A critical element of the strategy was to improve safety at taxi ranks.

Aberdeen Community Safety Partnership recognised that relocating taxi ranks to Union Street would heighten safety for taxi customers and drivers. The partnership recognised that street lighting, CCTV coverage and the width of pavements and roads were insufficient at the ranks immediately adjacent to Union Street which were used most by visitors to the night-time economy. It was recognised that safer taxi ranks could be created on Union Street and a broad partnership of stakeholders including taxi driver representatives were engaged in planning and implementation work. In addition to the relocation of ranks, initially at weekends and now throughout the week, CCTV and street lighting at the night-time ranks has been enhanced and transport marshals are deployed. Grampian Police report that it is more efficient to police Union Street ranks in comparison with previous arrangements.

As a result of the interventions delivered through Aberdeen Community Safety Partnership and collaboratively with many stakeholders there is strong evidence that the City Centre has become safer and has a far more positive image than previously.

The community safety partnership is certain that the closing of ranks off of Union and use of night-time ranks with additional safety arrangements has been a vital action in bringing about such positive changes. Such impact can be demonstrated through:

- Serious assaults within the city centre - **reduced by 46% in the past 6 years**
- Vandalism – **reduced by 18% over the past 2 years**
- Breaches of the Peace – **down 15%**
- Numbers of Licensing offences detected – **increase of 27%**

- **95.8%** residents reported feeling safe during day time and 79.3% reported feeling safe during night time
- Positive media reporting of City Centre safety

Aberdeen Community Safety Partnership continues to monitor levels of crime and antisocial behaviour in the City Centre very closely and prioritise resources to the area. While positive progress is being made the partnership recognises that successful changes made must be sustained.

Opening of ranks off Union Street which would not have the additional safeguards available at Union Street night-time taxi ranks would likely result in increased crime and antisocial behaviour. Examples of the consequences of this would be harm and injury to members of the public; increased demands on ambulance, health and police services; damage to the City's reputation.

Implementation of the proposal to open ranks adjacent to Union Street creates unacceptable and unnecessary safety risk to the public."