

ITEM 6b

PERFORMANCE REVIEW PANEL

19 JULY 2006

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LICENSING ACT IN MILTON KEYNES - A REPORT OF A RETURN LATE NIGHT VISIT TO THE THEATRE DISTRICT BY COUNCILLORS WILSON AND MORRIS

On Saturday 1 July/Sunday 2 the Chair and Vice Chair of the Panel made a late night/early morning visit to Central Milton Keynes to study the effect of the Licensing Act, and how it had been implemented in Central Milton Keynes. This followed a visit earlier in the year when it was decided to return at a time when it was thought likely to be at its busiest.

This particular date was chosen, being in the midsummer, and during the world cup, as this was thought likely to be a very busy period. We had not allowed for England's loss against Portugal earlier in the day however, which led to a somewhat subdued atmosphere, and whilst quite busy, nothing like what would have been the case had the football result been different. We were advised that pubs and bars had been very busy during the football, but that the City Centre had emptied soon afterwards. There had been sporadic minor skirmishes following the football, but by the evening a very different group of people were in the City Centre, including quite a number of Hen Parties.

We were accompanied for this visit by Police Sergeant Karen Griffiths and Phil Winsor from the Councils Environmental Health Department. We are grateful for the time and efforts taken by these people, who were also forthcoming in answering our many questions. We also had the opportunity to talk to a number of bar staff, especially security staff, and a few users.

There was and is a substantial Police presence on the streets during the early hours. Perhaps as a consequence there was little in the way of serious trouble. We witnessed just one significant incident, which was very quickly dealt with before it could escalate. The incident (on the streets) had been witnessed by CCTV operatives, and it was a matter of seconds only before the Police arrived from various directions, having been alerted through radio by the CCTV operatives.

It has to be said that the atmosphere felt safe, and relatively friendly, if at times somewhat noisy, though there was plenty of evidence of significant drinking and some drunkenness to be seen.

There is a good system of bar security in operation, and we were advised of good co-operation throughout the system in relation to undesirable clients. The Closing hours are staggered to a considerable extent and this minimises the number of people spilling out onto the streets at any one time. Many of

the Clubs heavily restricted entry in the later opening hours. This level of co-operation was even stronger when the same security firm was in operation, as is the case for three or four of the premises in the Theatre district. Even so, and despite the lack of any problems there may be some scope for agreeing even greater staggering of closing times. By and large most Pubs and Clubs closed on the hour, and there may be scope for agreeing greater staggering. Even a difference of 5 to 10 minutes can make a lot of difference, in enabling the streets to clear.

All of the Club security staff co-operated fully with the Police and most talked of a good relationship. This was true also of the Environmental Health Department. There have been very few appeals in Milton Keynes, and there is evidence of a broad agreement on the way forward, permeating into Licensing decisions. None the less, there is thought to be scope for all parts of the Trade, and the Council and the Police to meet more often, to discuss both operational and more strategic matters. One instance, shown to us, suggested scope for improvement. At the Xscape building, relatively narrow pavements can be a source of difficulties at times when people are leaving the clubs, and it would not be beyond possibility that some significant public realm improvements could take place here to improve community safety and reduce crime. Similarly both Hackney and Private Hire vehicles are compressed into a small space, and again some improvements in lay out are clearly possible. Extra additional Hackney Carriage ranks recently installed, were not being used and this requires some further thought. Some towns and cities have deployed staff to monitor and organise queues for taxis. They are a potential and real cause for problems, and whilst we witnessed no difficulties, and there were adequate vehicles on the night, we would request that some thought be given to these matters.

There remains a problem of private hire blagging despite the existence of the private hire pod, and this remains a concern. It is clearly not a priority for the Police, who are understandably more interested in getting people away quickly than the Taxi Licensing details. Even more worryingly, however, we also heard of a vehicle in use during the night that was not even registered as a private hire vehicle. This is disturbing and enforces the suggestion of Council staff to control and monitor the Taxi and Private Hire operations in Central Milton Keynes. We heard of the discussions aimed at re-introducing night bus services, based on a scheme in operation in Liverpool whereby using text technology people going in similar directions are brought together to make shared use of vehicles. We had no details of the proposed scheme, but again this is an important matter that needs developing.

We heard that the Council's Regulatory Committee had just agreed signage for private hire vehicles to ensure that customers are aware that they cannot use these vehicles as if they were Hackney Carriage Vehicles. We welcome this overdue development, and hope it can be implemented quickly. It is standard practice in many towns and cities already.

We were advised that Central Milton Keynes is an increasingly popular destination, and whilst the bulk of users are from a reasonable travel distance,

Milton Keynes is increasingly a destination for Hen and Stag Weekends for example (largely because of the many and growing Leisure and sporting activities in the area). This is a good thing, but increases the need for ever better policies and co-operation between all concerned.

The City Centre, and its various pubs and clubs is very much a 'drinking destination'. There is a much more limited range of restaurants, than typically found in many Town and City Centres, and the whole area should be examined to see if it is possible to have a more mixed and varied offer.

Milton Keynes has one benefit in that there are no residential areas immediately adjacent to the clubs and pubs, and relatively few people therefore walk home through residential areas. This may change as residential development is provided in Central Milton Keynes of course, but this is also a disadvantage. We heard of another City that had deliberately stamped down on Street Car Parking to encourage late night revellers into immediately walking away from the area, rather than milling around. This is another aspect worth considering as the greatest dangers arise from large numbers of young people in restricted areas at the same time.

The Police are now making extensive use of new spot fine legislation, which amongst other things avoids the need to make arrests. Arrests are still made when confirmation of name and address cannot be verified on the spot, or where the crime concerned is such that it would be most appropriate, or where this is a public order case for arrests to be made. We did not have any figures on this aspect however and we would like to obtain some.

In General however, we were impressed with the level of co-operation, and the high Police presence. The local economy is boosted by the night time economy, and we saw no reason why it should not be encouraged, but in a way that provides for an increasingly safe environment and where the offer mix is more varied and mixed.

Kevin Wilson