

MEETING REPORT

Meeting: Assets Committee, 2nd September 2024
Agenda item: AS24/011
Report subject: Watermark outside seating
Report author: K Elliott-Turner, Town Clerk

PROPOSAL

To consider correspondence from a resident outlining their concerns over antisocial behaviour and the presence of outside seating at The Watermark, and determine whether any action is to be taken or response is to be made.

Background

Prior to summer 2020, moveable metal bistro-style tables and chairs were used to provide outdoor seating, and had been in use for over 10 years. This increased the covers for the coffee shop, and gave customers an option to sit indoors or outside. This is particularly popular with many of our customers who bring their dogs with them. With the relaxation of some of the restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, council worked to encourage its Watermark customers back to using the facility and in particular the coffee shop element.

To aid sanitising measures, help retain distancing between diners, and to replace now aging metal seating, new picnic bench style seating was purchased in July/August 2020. Using individual metal tables and seats meant that each had to be wiped down when bringing in and out of the building, and between each use. The recycled plastic benches meant that there was no furniture movement required and sanitising was much easier. Having fixed seating also meant that diners, still nervous of Covid-19, could be reassured of distancing, whereas moveable chairs and tables risked close seating.

The Business Manager's Report to The Watermark Committee in September 2020, noted that the new picnic bench style seating allowed those who were still cautious of Covid-19 to sit outside, during the mild weather. Current staff who worked during that time advise that the fixed picnic bench style seating also helped boost trade at a difficult time, by enabling umbrellas to be used in all weathers, supported by the 'Eat Out To Help Out' scheme.

As a consequence of providing the fixed picnic bench style seating, we were able to significantly increase the number of covers, as follows:

Prior to 2020

3 metal tables and 12 metal chairs – with 4 chairs around each table, enabling people to sit very close together, seating a maximum of 12 people outside. The tables did not allow shade from the sun or rain, and on bright days heated up and reflected badly in the sun.

Summer 2020 onwards

4 picnic benches seating 8 people, and 2 picnic benches seating 6, making a maximum of 44 seated outside. During socially distancing times, this was decreased to 22. The picnic benches also allow use of parasols to provide shade/shelter.

MEETING REPORT



Metal tables (x3) and chairs (x12)



Recycled plastic picnic bench style (x6, seating 44)



MEETING REPORT

Correspondence received

A resident of Costly Street, adjacent to The Watermark, has outlined their concerns about the presence of the outside seating at the facility, the impact that antisocial behaviour has on them and other residents, and that they feel that the seating outside The Watermark attracts such behaviour.

"We wanted to bring up the issue of the seating outside the watermark. We all know how much anti social behaviour this has attracted over the last few years and how much this has affected the lives of the residents of Costly Street.

There are several elements to this topic.

Firstly the logic around making the decision to move from temporary seating to the permanent seating. The temporary seating arrangement was to set out the seating at the start of the day and bring it back in at the end of the day. A process that for 2 people took no more than 10 minutes daily.

This temporary seating arrangement was just as good a solution as the permanent seating as it still allowed people to have the option of sitting outside if they wished. Another point here is that at no time were the residents even told of this decision let alone consulted on it. A decision that was really obviously going to attract people late at night who are generally intent on causing issues.

Secondly the affects of installing the permanent seating. I'm sure you are aware of most of these but the list is late night noise, late night football, late night motorbike racing, late night skating, damage to vehicles, fighting, anti social drinking, urinating and clearing up the mess in the morning. There is also a police time cost to factor in.

Thirdly the viability of the permanent seating. We would like to know how much profit is made from having the permanent seating outside considering the weather for a lot of the year isn't compatible with sitting outside. You would also need to factor into this the council cost to clear up the mess in the mornings and the policing time cost sorting out the anti social behaviour.

Fourthly the solutions of this issue. This will obviously depend on the cost of removing the seating but we are asking to revert to the original situation of having temporary seating which will have marginal negative affects in terms of time to put out the seats and bring them in but huge positive affects in terms of quality of life for the residents. The absolute bare minimum should be removing the table closest to the houses.

The issues are currently less than normal but as the Police have said "its only a matter of time before the next group arrives on the scene". The Police have also informed us this week that they have asked the Watermark to revert to temporary seating.

MEETING REPORT

This situation really has had a detrimental affect on our lives. People who use the seating during the day and indeed yourselves after using the watermark can go home. The residents of Costly Street and the Police can't go elsewhere in the evening.

We hope to attend the council meeting on Monday but we feel this whole issue should be carefully reconsidered by the council.”

(Note, this correspondence was sent by the resident to a selection of councillors prior to the July Council meeting, and was referred to by a family member in attendance during the public section of that meeting in relation to their FOI request, with the matter subsequently being referred to this Committee for consideration)

Observations

To provide some clarification on points raised in the correspondence:

- ‘Late night football, late night motorbike racing, late night skating, damage to vehicles’ are not able to take place on The Watermark outside seating or on council owned land immediately surrounding The Watermark – this would likely take place elsewhere and is considered to be very unlikely to have any relation to the presence of the seating
- Any ‘mess’ around the seating area, as referred to by the resident, is minimal and Watermark staff confirm that it does not take long to clear up. Watermark staff confirm that in the first 8 months of this year, ‘mess’ found in the mornings has been negligible
- With regard to ‘profit made from having the permanent seating outside’, a response has already been provided to the resident’s family member under their recent FOI request – in that, we are unable to identify individual transactions relating to location of seating, however up to date accounts were provided showing income/expenditure for the coffee shop element of The Watermark
- The viability of the outside seating is evident. During the summer months, and indeed any mild weather whatever the time of year, customers enjoy the option of sitting outside. Having this type of seating immediately increases the number of covers, and therefore number of potential customers = income
- Both the Police and Watermark staff have confirmed that no such request has been made by the Police to revert to the original seating