

A Charter for Edinburgh:

The genesis for, what I rather grandly called, A Charter for Edinburgh was about how we could fix some of the problems that existed before we went into lockdown so rather than the year being lost we used the time without the Festivals and Events to consider what good Festivals and events and activity in the public sphere looks like.

Having received such a good response to the initial article I realised this could not just be yesterday's chip wrapper but would have to work up into something more tangible. Since my piece appeared it has been followed by a piece from Julia Armour from the Festivals and Juliana Delaney whose company runs Mary King's Close and they appear to be in the same mental space as me which is encouraging and I think this may be the time to grasp the nettle and try to effect change.

The increasing use of public space for events has seen tensions grow between those who live adjacent to, or overlook the space in the case of hard standing. With green spaces people who use the space regularly feel dispossessed when events are put on – especially when there is little warning or information about when and how the space will be used. The themes thrumming through 2019's festival was about the commercialisation of public space, dispossession and that those who live here all year round as residents or trade as businesses felt that the city had been given over to an alien event and they were roused to anger.

The Festivals started as Edinburgh's response to the dark days after the second world war – they were to be a welcoming light after these dark years and a balm to heal broken souls. Great art heals and unites because it is a common language. They were welcoming and unifying. They are also a magnificent achievement and something of which the City should be enormously proud. Any discussion of how public space and events happen in the City has to include the Festivals as part of the solution – there is no solution to the disgruntlement experienced last year without the Festivals. There is an additional pressure on the Festivals by additional events that would like to use Edinburgh's beauty as a backdrop for their events which has added to pressures experienced by residents throughout the year and heightens negative impacts of the Festivals on the residents as the noise, mess and chaos associated with events is no longer associated with a discrete part of the year but can occur at any time.

The necessity of addressing activity on the street has been discussed since the "regeneration" of the Grassmarket. The works to transform the area caused significant disruption but it was apparent that the impact once the works had been completed would need careful management. When that was in place and those managing the space worked with the residents there was an equilibrium. Losing that management resource has meant constant frustration for the residents, and council officers who are faced with complaints and frustration that cannot easily be ameliorated under current management arrangements

As events and Festivals have grown ever larger, Council officers have had to respond to these demands and time to create a framework for holding events has not been found. The cancellation of the Festivals this year allows us not only to see the City without the visitors but gives us breathing space to craft that framework and work out what we want our city to be and how we can re-find the welcoming, healing and unity of the first Festivals.

What we need:

To agree our common values and what the city can accommodate regarding events and what regulation activity on the street should be subject to.

Residents and visitors alike value the beauty of the City – part of its unique nature is that the centre remains very much a living city centre and, I would argue, that heritage is as much part of our World Heritage award as the fishbone plan of the Old Town and the formal plan of the New Town.

The city needs to make a choice about how to respond to the pandemic. City centres will be affected by the changes in working practices – there is a choice whether to throw open the city centre as a modern day Xanadu or as a place where people live, and live well, but also shares its beauty and experiences with the world. If the latter path is chosen it will require limitations on capacity. In theory the Tourist industry (represented by ETAG) and the Festivals are committed to spreading tourism and visitors across the city – setting a capacity on the city centre and saying no once this has been reached would assist with this aim. Restricting the amount of events would increase their rarity value and should assist with increasing charges and fees and hence contribute towards costs of the necessary management.

How:

There needs to be a set of management principles or rules which must be clear and enforceable. It would seem necessary to have city wide rules for all pavements and hard standing to ensure that they are passable and that anything on them has specific permission to be there.

There should be a publicly available record of this that anyone can consult.

Specific spaces for the holding of events would then be identified with their own management rules which should be agreed via consultation.

Alongside a clear set of rules for each area should also sit an events log so where there are agreed numbers of events anyone can consult the log to see what has been held and when. This should be populated as fully as possible and as soon as an event is known.

Current situation:

The public spaces manifesto which does some of this work is due to come to Councillors on the Culture and Communities Committee for agreement. This is currently in development and we should seek an opportunity to involve community councils in the pre-consultation stage. At the recent All Party Oversight Group on this I suggested that the Festivals be brought into this to look at the broader issues and to try and achieve agreement with key groups: residents; festivals; tourism

businesses who operate in these spaces and probably have most to lose as a reduction in the quantity of visitors will impact them.

Activity	Current Control	Possible Control
Amplified music	Noise pamphlet/posters in some places	Blanket ban on amplified music by council policy/by-law
Advertising on street	Banned by council policy – needs better enforcement	
Walking tours	Unregulated	Work with industry to agree code of practice
Tables and chairs	Controlled via permit	
Markets/trading	Controlled via license	
Closing off streets for events	Controlled by roads/public safety/environmental health	Experience for users and complainers could be improved to make it easier to apply/notify/object/approve
Structure up for more than 28 days/some advertising	Controlled via planning permission	

Areas for improvement:

Residents feel they have no control over what goes on the street and how it impacts them – agree a framework for maximum use of particular areas and what type of activities are suitable; create a publicly accessible digital log so people can plan in advance and know what events are upcoming; create a sign up service for each area so people are notified of what events are proposed; where amplified music is allowed ensure monitoring of noise levels is part of a permission – set these in conjunction with residents and monitor them (surely this can be done remotely) and cut the noise if levels are breached.

What is above are examples – there will be issues I have missed out; there will also be some which people don't agree should be regulated but for this (and I can see that may cause some debate) to be agreed we will need people to come to the table willing to make this work, willing to listen, willing to compromise and wanting the best for the future of the city. We also need to get people round the table and if you want to be there I will endeavour to find a virtual table and a way to take this forward.

I have been encouraged by what I have read and I am convinced that we need a clear statement of what we expect from the Council, from the Festivals, from events organisers about how our space is used and then a way of holding the parties to account so the residents can do what they do best and provide a warm welcome.