

Opinion : An Even Playing Field?

This weekend sees the return of the [Edinburgh Mela](#). For those who don't know, Edinburgh Mela is a festival of world music, dance, fashion, food and fun, embracing the city's diverse communities and cultures. The idea is that by providing the population with music, dance and other arts from around the world, the festival can help in "promoting understanding between people and advancing the cause of community coherence." Not only that, but you can enjoy some of the best food around.

Like most people in Edinburgh, I'm looking forward to the Mela's return. The trouble is, there's a problem with how they are treating Leith Links, which has acted as host since 2010. You would think that as part of advancing community coherence, the Mela would make sure they take care of the location where they pitch their tents and stalls. After all, the Links are the principal open space within Leith, totalling 18.5 hectares and contain children's play areas, football pitches, an enclosed lawn bowls bowling green and a cricket pitch. Most of these are in the Links' western section, while the eastern one is used for general use. [Leith Athletic](#), a community football club, is one of the groups that makes use of the Links' pitches. They have teams competing in the East of Scotland senior league plus youth teams from the under 6's up to the under 21's. They've also recently launched a girls' team and are trying to find enough participants to form Under 9 and 11 teams.

Sadly, though, the club has postponed games and training as the areas they use on a weekly basis are now fenced off in preparation for the Mela. To make matters worse, there are now tyre tracks all the way to the main marquee, which is pitched right in the middle of the soccer 7s pitch. These are

pitches that Leith Athletic volunteers taking care of, including making sure the grass is cut to a suitable length and painting the lines. When you combine the recent rainfall and the Mela's footfall – somewhere in the region of 27,000 people – that means this pitch will probably be unplayable for the next few months. Another area of the Links, where the club have their main pitch, is currently covered in tyre marks despite claims that organisers would ensure boards were placed on the grass to allow vehicles to drive materials onto the Links. This clearly has not happened, as you can see in these photographs. In fairness though, the Mela are not the only culprits when it comes to taking care of the Links, the circus and the shows also cause damage when they visit.



According to the Mela's website, they are taking steps to manage the event in a more sustainable way and reducing its environmental impacts. That all sounds well and good but they don't seem to care about the impacts, environmentally or otherwise, their actions are having on other members of the community, with whom they share the site. If the Mela is about the community growing closer together than a good place to start is with mutual respect and consideration. Sadly, that seems lacking in this case.

Leith Athletic accept that they do not have sole use of the

Links as it is a park for all the community. However, they do expect people to treat the area with respect, leaving it in the same condition they found it to ensure it's in a fit state for others that use it. From what I have learnt this afternoon, the Mela and Edinburgh Council do not share these beliefs. Now, the community club are faced with repairing the damaged areas and finding funds to pay for this cost. Perhaps Steve Cardownie, deputy leader of City of Edinburgh Council and Chair of the Mela's Board of Directors, could help by spending some time helping to make the area good again. Maybe the Mela will even undertake the repairs themselves. Of course, if they had used boards to protect the Links or sited the festival on the park's eastern area, they wouldn't have to.

POST-SCRIPT

I did contact the Mela to see if they had any comment about complaints raised or the state of the Links. So far they have not responded to my phone message. However, since publishing this, the Mela's Twitter account has contacted me twice. The first time was to ask where the complaints are so they can respond to them, the second time to say they will "have a full response tomorrow. Please note the Mela have paid a bond to the council to cover any damage." That's good to know but they could have avoided losing that bond and damaging the Links by using boards to protect the grass, as they were supposed to do.