

Calton Hill closure – what does it have to do with money?



Is it true (as the [Edinburgh Evening News](#) want us to believe) that the closure of Calton Hill on Hogmanay is absolutely all about the council saving money? The council deny this, saying at every opportunity that the decision not to make this an official viewing area was made on safety grounds, and was made in discussion with all other agencies involved including Scottish Ambulance Service and Police Scotland.

There is also the revelation that there are tickets left for the street party, allowing critics of the hill closure to suggest that Edinburgh's Hogmanay just want to sell more tickets. The event was a sell-out last year without the need for such a measure, so can that be true?

It is true that the council official who reported to Chief Executive Andrew Kerr on the proposed closure did mention money *in just one line* of his letter to Mr Kerr.

The letter said:

“While Calton Hill has been used as a viewing point for the Hogmanay fireworks for a number of years, it is not an official viewing area for the celebrations, and is used as a firing site for the midnight fireworks. Stewards are provided to secure the fireworks site, but the hill is unlit, is not an official viewing area and no facilities are in place to accommodate any audience (e.g. sufficient steward numbers, toilets, first aid, etc. Legislation and best practice require these measures at organised public events.). The budget challenges facing the Council mean there is no funding

to make this an official site. In addition, assessments of current prevailing wind speed and direction indicate a very large area of the hill acting as a fall out zone for fireworks debris for Hogmanay.

Over recent years the number of people gathering on Calton Hill has substantially increased. Estimates now put this at a few thousand. As a viewing area, Calton Hill is a specific concern because of its topography, the presence of fireworks (both firing and debris) and the growing number of people on the hill. Given it is Hogmanay, alcohol consumption must also be a consideration.

Opening the hill will put additional burden on Police Scotland resources and require additional first aid provision on a night that already sees the emergency services highly pressured. If the weather is particularly cold or wet then risks increase further.

Taking all of the above into account, and the continuous assessment procedures in place to ensure crowd management and safety, the Edinburgh's Hogmanay Core Group (comprising representatives from Council Public Safety, Scottish Ambulance Service, Police Scotland, Scottish Fire & Rescue Service and Unique Events) reviewed the site risks and arrived at the decision to close the Hill to the public.

There are other areas within the city centre from which to view the fireworks, including North Bridge where safety arrangements are put in place for the public. While the Street Party provides safe and managed city centre celebrations, North Bridge is also stewarded and has first aid provision to accommodate the public. The Meadows and Inverleith Park remain safe and popular sites for the public to view the fireworks."

So is the correct interpretation of **one sentence** in this letter that the move was made all because of money, or is it

truly a matter of concern for the health and safety of citizens and visitors?

There are those who feel so strongly about the closure that they have started [petitions](#) to persuade the council to open the hill to the public, saying that the council is acting like an over-protective nanny (It has always been an informal viewing area in the past). There are others so affronted by this restriction on their rights that they appear set to storm the barricades later this evening.

When The Edinburgh Reporter asked the Culture Convener Councillor Richard Lewis on Tuesday during the press briefing what the alternatives were to using Calton Hill he suggested North Bridge, Inverleith Park etc, where there will be stewards, and Pete Irvine of Unique Events said that the higher fireworks can in any case be viewed from all over the city.

The Culture Convener did concede that the decision, made last month, might have been publicised earlier than it was, but repeated that the reasons for it were all about health and safety.

Any decision involving the council does of course have to be viewed as part of a larger picture; in a climate of budget reductions, voluntary (perhaps compulsory) redundancies among council staff, and decreasing revenue budgets which affects all council departments and not just this one. What do we want the council to spend the money on? They have just held a three month long [consultation](#) on that very subject.

You can also watch our [video interviews](#) with the main conveners about the finances of their departments and the upcoming council budget to be agreed at the end of January (which the council say is made a little more difficult by the Scottish Government's [budget](#) announced in December).

Would the council have been right to 'find' the money

somewhere in their budget to enable Calton Hill to become an official viewing spot, and how much would it have cost anyway? There are many other draws on their finances, and prioritising spending on the growing population at either end of the age spectrum seems to be their main goal. Would it have been right to spend what might easily have been a six figure sum on opening the hill for a couple of thousand people for a few hours this evening?

The council has had a revenue budget of around £1bn to spend in the recent past, but in the next financial year that total will be reduced by £126m and the council aims to make a further £15m of savings to allow it to spread the cuts over the next few year

The Chief Executive has now issued the necessary Section 11 notice which Malcolm Combe has been keeping an eye on as you can see below. This enables the council to close the hill from 7pm this evening till 2am on New Year's Day.

What do you think?

Just in time for Hogmanay, here is The City of Edinburgh Council's s.11 order to suspend Calton Hill access rights.
pic.twitter.com/9R8Yjvb9Xc

– Malcolm CoMBE (@MalcolmCombe) [December 31, 2015](#)