

Save the Portobello setts – we love them say locals



Some people in Portobello are very annoyed with the council who they say appear to have done a U-Turn on Brighton Place and have decided to tarmac over its historic cobbles.

The decision was made in January, apparently flying in the face of the council officer's recommendations and the council's stated views, and it is recommended that the money saved from the roads budget is now to be spent in Dalry and Gilmerton.

As always it appears that such decisions come down to money.

Tomorrow the Transport committee will hear a report on the condition of the city's setted streets which they say are such an "important feature of historic and cultural significance for the city". The report goes on to say that setted streets are an 'important factor' in retaining the city's authenticity as a World Heritage Site, and that they 'add to the attractiveness of the city'.

The council has recently consulted with its twin city Krakow about the culture around setts or cobbles, and they have also looked into the measures which need to be used in preserving them and maintaining them.

Deputation at Transport committee meeting

But at their earlier meeting in January, the committee decided (in spite of a deputation by Chartered Surveyor, Vic Michel, and Judith Read from Brightons and Rosefield Residents' Association, Portobello Amenity Society and Portobello Heritage Trust) who asked for the setts in Brighton Place to

be renovated as originally planned. They asserted that it is a main gateway to the conservation area at Portobello and the setts provide a sense of identity crucial to the area. Scroll to the bottom of this article to see for yourself what the street looks like, as we interviewed local residents there.

Mr Michel explained that the community council had supported the covering of the setts by tarmac. He continued: "We are glad that our local councillor Maureen Child supports our view. The setts are an integral feature of the conservation area, and if they are removed, will never be replaced. The setts are a major factor in many people moving here. The importance of setts is well accepted I think. 75% of residents in Brighton Place who responded to a recent survey support the retention of setts. A council officer said at a recent meeting that setts, if laid properly, should last for 100 years.

"Our own High Street was laid about 10 years ago and it seems in still pretty good condition. Cyclists in the main seem to be in favour of retaining the setts.

"The setts were here long before the dissenting voices. Surely it is our duty to preserve the streetscape of our city for future generations."

Judith Read said : "I have lived in Portobello all my life, and the setts on Brighton Place are one of the more dramatic characteristics of the entrance to Portobello. To many this is a key area in Portobello."

Conservative Cllr Nick Cook said that he supported the community council who had carried out a public consultation, but Mr Michel suggested the basis for the consultation was flawed. He explained that the community council had presumed that the setts would last for only 25 years whereas the true life was nearer 40 years.

Councillor Mowat said that to enable the setts to last for 40 years the council would have to somehow gain control over

utility companies. Mr Michel said that there is a correct way of laying a highway and it is to ensure that the utility companies are given the chance to do any work and then ban them from re-entry unless there is a disastrous situation, but it appeared that the transport committee do not have any way of doing that.

The Transport Convener explained that the council had been planning a different approach to road repairs in the future and the capital investment, which is a large part of the council's budget, and then the motion to simply tarmac the street was passed, after a bit of discussion about the Conservative amendment which was defeated.

The council report stated that the 2015/16 budget included funding for Brighton Place and consultation had been recommended to determine the appropriate type of resurfacing in Brighton Place. [The most extensive consultation](#) was that carried out by Portobello Community Council which gathered over 400 responses.



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Consultation was also undertaken by Brighton and Rosefield Residents Association, Portobello Heritage Trust and Portobello Amenity Society. All of these stakeholders strongly supported the renewal of setts in Brighton Place.

In view of this the council officers recommended that the setts be retained.

But when the committee voted, it agreed to adopt **Option 2** from the Portobello Community Council consultation in regard to Brighton Place : that is not just to cover the surface with asphalt, but to dig up the setts and form a proper asphalt roadway, and then decide in March what they would do with the resources released by doing this.

Transport committee meet on Tuesday 15 March

The amount of money saved has been calculated at £600,000 and the Transport Committee will decide on Tuesday whether to use that sum to improve to repair Dalry Road and Gilmerton Road.

Councillor Mowat said the Conservatives wanted a holistic approach to road repairs and were trying to get the 'best bang for their buck', while Councillor Hinds explained that the new approach which has been developed over a couple of years will increase the number of roads and pavements which are repaired in the coming year.

While the council has closed off North West Circus Place completely to allow the whole width of that street to be repaired, replaced and completely renovated, the council also believes that it will be an improvement to tarmac some streets, including Brighton Place.

In a catchily entitled report called 'Setts in the City' Edinburgh World Heritage and British Geological Survey looked into repairing and conserving cobbled streets.

In conservation areas the planning guidelines recommend that all setted streets should be retained, and these are subject to a general protection in terms of the Local Development Plan.

Lack of repair

But some of these streets, including Brighton Place, have not ever been repaired or maintained. Heavier traffic has done nothing to help, and cobbles have suffered enormously across the city. You only have to be a regular road user in Hill Street or the foot of Howe Street, or indeed Randolph Place to know that going any faster than 10 miles an hour there is dangerous to you and your vehicle.

Some streets were repaired in the 1990s such as Thirlestane Road and Queensferry Street Lane and the council says it has a stock of reclaimed setts for any repairs. So we are still at a loss to know why the council made this decision. We asked the Transport Convener for a comment, but none has so far been forthcoming. We will ask again after the committee meeting tomorrow.

The council has allocated about £1m in the 2016-17 budget for renewals of setted streets. The council say that it is more expensive to repair setts than to repair tarmac, meaning fewer streets can be fixed, but admits that the setts may last longer, so savings could be made on the maintenance budget. The £600,000 question is whether that money would be better spent in Portobello on setts than on tarmac.

The council report questions safety and noise issues, but admits that safety appears enhanced due to traffic normally travelling at lower speeds on these streets.

So what to do? Well the council aim to look into that by improving their in-house maintenance skills, listing all the setted streets and reviewing the traffic using them and then working out a range of ways these streets will be repaired and

maintained.

Will this be enough to save Brighton Place? We simply don't know, but it looks unlikely. The street appears to be on the list of setted streets (well they are still there) but whether the council will reverse its decision made in January is really unclear.

We met with local residents who have an online petition running which has so far gathered about 800 signatures.

[The Edinburgh Reporter News](#) from [Phyllis Stephen](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Diana Cairns said : "The £600,000 is the difference between the figure quoted for the asphalt and the figure for the setts. What has not been taken into account is the fact that the setts will last more than twice as long as the asphalt so while it's a higher upfront cost it is better value in the long

run. Ripping them up is a false economy. The fact that the money "saved" will not be spent in Portobello is another blow."

Stephen Hawkins who is a local resident and former Councillor said: "I think this decision is purely about money. This proposal was already in the roads budget, costed and approved last year so why they have suddenly changed their mind and why suddenly it has become so expensive I don't know."

Another local resident, Jim Hurford said: "The people who drive up here haven't such strong views, but local residents have. It is one of the main ways into Portobello and this is a great introduction."

The Edinburgh Reporter spoke to local MSP Kenny Macaskill who said: "I had heard about this as one of my constituents contacted me.

"I have been surprised that the difference between the two costs, whether for asphaltting or to retain the setts is so

little. I do think it would be a shame as there is something quite grand about the cobbles. I am not convinced by the noise argument, it seems to me that noise comes from diesel engines not from the setts. I have said to my constituents that I will speak to councillors as it is a council decision. Hopefully it is one that can be reviewed. I think we have enough asphalt in the world. I am always a bit depressed when I see anyone laying tarmac in their gardens.

“In France all public buildings have to have grass growing on them, and I believe we live in a world where we have to tackle global warming. This is a Portobello issue, and although the council have a squeeze on their budget, Georgian Portobello is very grand and I am very fond of it. If the council can find the money at all in these difficult times, then it would be good to retain the setted streets.”

Local Councillor Maureen Child said: “I think our Council policy of replacing the historic setts is the right one and many will regret their loss. In the case of Brighton Place, I believe transport, thrift and expediency have trumped concern for Portobello’s heritage.

“I suspect the 800 or so who have signed the petition in support of Council’s ‘designing streets’ policy comes too late to change the minds of Transport Committee Members. They decided the matter unanimously at their last meeting.”

The petition running on 38 degrees explains the issue from their point of view:

We ask the City of Edinburgh Council to reverse its decision to remove the historic setts (cobblestones) from Brighton Place, Portobello, Edinburgh. The removal of the setts would be detrimental to this part of the Portobello conservation area and would have repercussions for the rest of Edinburgh.

The sett replacement was unanimously approved in the 2015/16 budget and notification had been given in writing by the

council that the work was approved and would be going ahead in 2016. However, at the Transport and Environment Committee in January 2016, with no prior warning, the decision was made, against council policy, to remove the setts and replace with tarmac.

You can sign it [here](#) if you feel so minded.

You can read all of the papers for tomorrow's Transport Committee meeting [here](#) (and these include minutes of the January meeting).