

Gordon Lindhurst MSP – The Future of Edinburgh’s World Heritage Site



by Gordon Lindhurst MSP

This week in the Scottish Parliament I will be leading a debate on Edinburgh’s World Heritage Site, an issue that has come in to sharp focus over the last few years.

The UNESCO status that the old and new towns have had since 1995 is a source of great pride for our city. And we are in good company; the Great Barrier Reef in Australia; Machu Picchu in Peru and Petra in Jordan are some of the other examples. A report earlier this year concluded that 96% of respondents felt the city’s heritage is beneficial, while the Site brings in between £1.2 and £1.4 billion to the economy.

But reports recently have indicated that there are threats to that status. Debate has been rife around a number of different development proposals, from what to do with the old Royal High School on Calton Hill to the re-energised St James’ centre. Whilst Edinburgh needs to develop and re-build itself where it needs a new lease of life, or to grow where there are opportunities to do so, our built heritage should always be respected and developed appropriately.

It is not just planning that affects the status of the World Heritage Site however. Edinburgh World Heritage recently surveyed 202 buildings in the city centre, finding that 72% of them were in need of some sort of repair.

Crumbling tenement buildings can do as much harm to the UNESCO status as new developments and it is the responsibility of everyone who has something to do with the old and new towns to play their part.

It is perhaps also not a coincidence that there is a lack of understanding about the World Heritage Site. A recent survey of almost 600 people, conducted to inform the World Heritage Site Management Plan, concluded that whilst “the awareness of the city centre’s World Heritage site status was rated highly, respondents were mostly unaware of what it meant and what the benefits were”. (City of Edinburgh Council).

These various factors tell me that we need to step back and think about the future of our city and its built heritage. Members Business debates in the Scottish Parliament allow MSPs the opportunity to raise issues of local importance that would not otherwise have been debated at length in Holyrood. We have reached a crossroads with Edinburgh’s World Heritage Site status, where we need a re-invigorated approach to ensure its maintenance for generations to come. I hope that by bringing the debate to the national level at the Scottish Parliament I can raise the profile of the issue, get people talking about it and understand more fully what needs to be done in the years ahead to preserve Edinburgh as the “Venice of the North.”