

Marketing Edinburgh loses its chief executive

For the second time in a decade the Chief Executive of Marketing Edinburgh the body charged with selling Edinburgh to the world has quit.

In 2012 the then boss Lucy Bird quit in the wake of an unsuccessful marketing strategy which councillors found unpalatable.

In 2019 the Chief Executive John Donnelly has quit in the wake of council budget cuts announced in February. The council threatened to slash the budget of its marketing organisation by 89% over two years, but eventually gave in to pressure and reined back to a cut of around £300,000. The overall funding to Marketing Edinburgh is about £1 million a year, so this was still not insubstantial.



John Donnelly CEO of Marketing Edinburgh who has just quit The body is behind Film Edinburgh which has brought millions in inward investment with the likes of Trainspotting 2 and Avengers choosing Edinburgh as a film location. During the Avengers filming many hotel rooms in three city centre luxury hotels were booked for three months while the cast and crew turned the streets into a film set.

Donnelly was vocal in his condemnation of the moves to cut funding from what he saw as an essential service. In an interview with us in February when the conference arm of ME, Convention Edinburgh, had just delivered another international conference to the city, he told us : “We bring around £75 million of economic impact into the city through Convention Edinburgh which is part of Marketing Edinburgh. I think it’s worth saying that conference organisers buy cities, not venues. They expect you to have a conference centre, an airport. Those are just tickets to the game.

“What you are actually bidding for is a city not a venue or an airport.”

I suggested to Mr Donnelly that Edinburgh has a lot to offer.

He replied : “Yes, but so do all other cities. There are 80 other cities in the room next door who would all argue that they’ve got a lot to offer and do you know what? They do. It’s a very competitive world out there.

“If Edinburgh rests on its laurels and becomes complacent, then it will suffer.”

He repeatedly asked for the proposed Tourist Tax to be paid direct to Marketing Edinburgh so that it could be funded in isolation from the council. He told The Edinburgh Reporter that he would fight the proposals to cut the funding which endangered the whole body and its staff. The council always had

Even after the council’s final budget was announced, Donnelly explained that it would mean the organisation behind the successful This is Edinburgh campaign would have to make substantial changes. Now it seems that he has decided that his departure will be one of those changes.



The Board made a statement about the situation which they issued through their PR company.

A spokesperson for Marketing Edinburgh said: "Now that our approved business plan is in place, Marketing Edinburgh is ready to move forward. Over the coming months, we will try to realise the challenges of functioning on minimum Council funding, and so it is an appropriate time for John to leave the business.

"John has worked tirelessly over the past few years, building a talented, experienced team who are ready to continue the organisation's invaluable work, start a new chapter and bring significant gain to the city."

John Donnelly said : "It has been an honour to lead Marketing Edinburgh; from the introduction of This is Edinburgh, to increasing film production in the city, attracting millions of pounds worth of conferences and the building of an impressive partner network. However, given wider changes, the time was right to explore other opportunities. I leave Marketing Edinburgh in capable hands."

Earlier in the year bodies who supported [Marketing Edinburgh](#) published an open letter to councillors about their financing proposals. It stated :

"Spare a thought for Marketing Edinburgh – the body that promotes Scotland's Capital – who just days ago found out that the city of Edinburgh Council intends to almost immediately remove 64% of its budget from the organisation, rising to 89% in year two. The proposal – if passed – will go live in a little over eight weeks, leaving Edinburgh as the only major city in the developed world without a Destination Marketing Management Organisation.

"This is despite Marketing Edinburgh having demonstrated that they return £99 to the local economy for every one pound spent by them. It ignores their central role in the £74M business

tourism and £16M film promotion economies. And it undermines the work they do to attract investment from the private sector, which they completely reinvest in city campaigns.

“They also run the city’s consumer digital channels, unite city stakeholders, facilitate thousands of conventions, support hundreds of film and TV productions...the list goes on.

“But all this seemingly doesn’t matter to the Council, who want to pull the rug with no obvious contingency or regard for the damage that will be done.”

As to a replacement the Board said : “We will reflect on the skills we need to lead the business through this period of change before we find the right person. In the meantime, the organisation will continue to be supported by a strong, experienced board and its talented team. It’s very much business as normal.”