

Winter Festival events in Edinburgh are a disaster – discuss

I can remember when the summer and winter events in Edinburgh were unregulated. It was a bit of a mess.

I recall one night being in a crowd of people shoving and pushing around the statue at the top of Castle Street to get a view of the fireworks for example.

It was not a place you could easily take children without fear for their safety. In fact you sometimes feared for your own among the 200,000 + strong crowd.

During the winter months there was little in the way of entertainment in Edinburgh except parties in hotels or at home and only the hardy went to The Tron on the High Street to party there at the bells. Partying really meant drinking. If you wanted to drink it generally had to be at home as pubs and clubs then closed for several days over New Year, or you had to get yours at the off licence before they closed.

When Unique and Pete Irvine took on the organisation of Hogmanay the events became better planned and organised. The fireworks – at one time sponsored by the Bank of Scotland – were great. Then many other events were added, with the advent of New Year's Day events like Scot:Lands declared a great

success. Certainly that was a forerunner to the Burns & Beyond which Unique are organising later this month and which has some great Scottish acts on offer.



Pete Irvine Director of Edinburgh's Hogmanay with Fiona Hyslop Cabinet Secretary for Culture launching Scot:LANDS in November 2015. PHOTO Lloyd Smith

When the contract last came up for renewal in March 2017, Unique were bitterly disappointed when they lost the deal to Underbelly who now run Christmas and Hogmanay (these are two separate contracts).

Underbelly took on a contract to deliver three years of Christmas and Hogmanay with an option to extend. Underbelly took on the responsibility for all financial risk including the cost of policing the whole event.

We asked Underbelly how much this part of the operation costs and were told : "The policing plan for Hogmanay was carefully considered alongside stewarding arrangements to ensure a safe event for all. The total cost of policing the ticketed street

party was confirmed by the Scottish Police Authority to us as the event organisers. This is a commercial arrangement and so it is not appropriate to give any further details.”

The contract was won in an open tender process with 20+ new key performance indicators (KPIs) agreed to reflect the refreshed look of the winter festivals.

In 2017/18 ticket sales for the Christmas programme increased by 9.1%. 5,000 people attended the new Bairns Afore event at the Ross Bandstand for a family friendly early celebration of the turn of the year. 75,000 people attended the events in the gardens and the organisers reported that 165,994 people attended the events over the three days. All of these numbers exceeded the KPIs.

The overarching goals for the winter festivals were laid down by the council in their Culture plan:

To ensure that everyone has access to world class cultural provision

To encourage the highest standards of creativity and excellence in all aspects of cultural activity

To support greater partnership working in the creative and cultural sectors and maximise resources available to help them thrive all year round

To articulate the positive impact of culture in Edinburgh and promote Edinburgh’s cultural success locally, nationally and internationally.

For the Christmas contract Underbelly pay a fee to the council and for Hogmanay the council make a ‘budget’ available to the organisers with the proviso that the organisers Underbelly are responsible for any event costs over and above that. Somewhere in the dim and distant past an amount of £800,000 was

mentioned, but nowhere can we find where the surplus goes. The surplus from Christmas is ploughed into funding Hogmanay, but how much is made from the latter and what happens to it is anyone's guess. The Underbelly accounts filed at Companies House are little help.

20,000 tickets were sold for the Torchlight Procession and 75,000 tickets for the events and concerts on Hogmanay. A ticket and torch for the procession on 30 December cost £13 and a ticket for the street party was £30 and £80 for the Ross Bandstand enclosure or £70 for the gardens.

There are those on social media who claim that Underbelly make £45 million from the event – and they have to be wrong. We have asked Bella Caledonia for their calculation as set out below.

Hogmanay Maths. The Council pays Underbelly £800+K a year to run the winter festivals. Underbelly makes an estimated £45m from the event. Creative Scotland and other bodies give Underbelly £180k +. The End.

*– Bella Caledonia – Scotland's 5th Estate (@bellacaledonia)
[January 1, 2020](#)*

£45 million is the initially quoted cost of the new Concert Hall (although that may now be double). It was the initial price of the Scottish Parliament building 20 years ago. It is a lot of money.

Even if 75,000 people spent £100 that amounts to £7.5 million of income. Quite where the rest of the income or indeed profit comes from we cannot say.

Comments on social media about this and about Underbelly in particular continue even now days after the torches have been extinguished. Some comments are founded on fact and some are

completely unfounded as is the wont of social media.

A petition has been started to dislodge the council leader from his position, and a newer one to [stop Underbelly ruining the city](#) centre for residents. Whether or not these gather support, one thing will happen – the Culture Convener has called for a consultation on the Winter Festivals and this will take place over the next eighteen months.

On 28 December, before the three days of Edinburgh's Hogmanay had even begun, Mike Small wrote in [Reimagining the City](#) : "Let's start from the basis that Underbelly's events have been a disaster and should be shut down immediately. They soak up public money, refuse to be transparent about their profits, cause environmental damage to public parks, and shut down and blight open spaces held in the common good. It's entirely the city council's fault that this has been allowed to happen but it needs shut down now."

There is no justification given for any of these claims on the website which sets out as its aim : "Citizen is a network of people working to re-imagine the city as a sustainable place for people to live in, one of social justice and equality, not just a space for consumption and profit."

The organisation Citizen claims 103 likes on Facebook, 1,000 followers on Twitter and 81 followers on Instagram. [Mr Small](#) is also the editor of the website, Bella Caledonia mentioned above.



SPONSORS

Johnnie Walker has been a big corporate sponsor of the summer and winter festivals and it is not hard to see why. They are developing the former Binns building at the West End and are making their mark here by splashing some cash here in the past few years. All funding of this kind has to be welcomed by the city and the council which is trying hard to make cuts on its revenue budget to be set later this month.

Underbelly will not reveal how much they make from the events that they organise. Perhaps they ought to. It would set the record straight. We have already told you the story of the Loony Dook [here](#) where we assert that the organisers probably do not make much money after all costs are met.

One of the other key aims was to reduce the cost of the events

to the council, who are the main funders, and in the annual report Underbelly claimed that the cost had reduced by just over £1 million. The report also states that Box Office revenues now make up 61% of the Hogmanay income. There is funding of £15 million available from The Scottish Government and the council's [PLACE](#) scheme announced in November 2018. How much of that is used for Hogmanay is not defined.

The Environment

The council set out environmental guidance for the organisers with an accompanying undertaking to 'minimise impact on the environment' and to use energy efficiently, and obliged them to reinstate Princes Street Gardens and the other sites, although no precise details of what that really means appear to be publicly available.

This reinstatement is further complicated by the fact that the [National Galleries of Scotland](#) had undertaken work to form new pathways and views to the galleries earlier this year. All those who fronted the outcry to complain about the loss of 22 trees were about three years too late in doing so. The galleries had planning permission from the council, and that had begun at least three years previously. The felled trees are due to be replaced by new ones in the gardens and elsewhere as part of that permission.



Ed Bartlam left and Charlie Wood directors of Underbelly at the press conference held ahead of the three day Edinburgh's Hogmanay festival PHOTO ©2019 The Edinburgh Reporter

Permission

Things have rumbled along fairly well until this year but then in November, the event organisers were forced to admit in reply to an enquiry by the Cockburn Association that they had no planning permission for the Christmas Market a couple of weeks before the opening.

In fact they did not have permission last year either, as revealed by The Broughton Spurtle, and so began an onslaught of accusations levelled at the organisers. Some see them as a couple of Etonians who profiteer and run off back to London with the profit. Certainly the company also organise very similar events in London over the festive period, but both of them are often seen around Edinburgh.

The planning permission under the previous contract had

expired in January 2018, which presumably means that any licences for the sale of alcohol etc granted last year were granted by the council in error. Insurance cover must have been questionable in light of the planning situation. That is yet to be investigated.

The contract was renewed and extended under delegated powers to council officers in summer 2019, and was not directly scrutinised by any council committee. The Director of Place, Paul Lawrence, agreed terms and authorised the contract. According to the written record, councillors were consulted before the decision was made – but perhaps not all of the councillors, even those on the Culture Committee.



East Princes Street Gardens at the end of October 2019 Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com

Cllr Iain Whyte, the leader of the Conservative Group on the council, was happy to pen an article for the Edinburgh Evening News published on 30 December. He was openly critical of those at the 'top of the council' who he said 'don't understand the city'. He is entitled to his view of course on what he

describes as the 'increasingly gaudy Christmas and New Year experience', but he did this on the very same day I met him quaffing free wine at the VIP reception at the Scottish Storytelling Centre before the Torchlight Procession – courtesy of Underbelly. (Yes we had some too!)

My piece in the [@edinburghpaper](#) today. "People at the top don't understand our city". pic.twitter.com/Y9BUemLgqm

– Iain Whyte (@CllrWhyte) [December 30, 2019](#)

FACT AND FICTION

Claims which began on social media, asserted that residents in the city centre were being forced to apply for passes for themselves and their guests for access to what is called the event 'arena'. This was completely refuted by Underbelly and by the Culture Convener who both said the arrangements were the same as before – except the pass was now a wristband.

As you need to pay to attend the Edinburgh's Hogmanay Street Party, it is clear that some sort of arrangements have to be made for those who live there, as they have been in the past. Watch our video below for our interview with the Culture Convener Donald Wilson.

Councillors of all political parties are not aligned on these matters. Labour councillor Mandy Watt has said that the contract with Underbelly should be rescinded as they have brought Edinburgh into disrepute. Green councillor Susan Rae criticised Underbelly for charging an entry fee for the Loony Dook.

Some critics flagged up that the beautiful nativity scene

donated to the city by Sir Tom and Lady Farmer was moved from its new location on The Mound on 27 December 2019 to make way for the Hogmanay structures. Those were then removed a day or so after Hogmanay had finished and by Saturday 4 January The Mound at least looked a bit like its old self again.



© Martin McAdam

Star Flyer. Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com

The structures all over Princes Street Gardens making up the Christmas Market closed on Saturday too, although it may take a day or two for them to be removed. Then we will see the damage in the gardens – which Underbelly is due to make good in terms of their contract.

We will be keeping an eye on that process and watching out for the promised consultation on the winter festivals beginning this spring.

Meantime we have to say that we very much enjoyed being in the city centre at Hogmanay and the entertainment from Mark Ronson and Marc Almond was just superb. Were you there? What did you think? Here's a wee taste...

