

South Bridge Resource Centre – existing tenants raise objections to the Fringe moving in

If the Festival Fringe Society get a long lease of the South Bridge Resource Centre from the council on Thursday then it will fly in the face of fairness according to some of the existing tenants.

The only engagement that the members of the Adult Learners Forum say they have had over the last year was when council officials turned up without the forum members knowing that was going to happen.

A member of the Forum said that all the council officers did was “just impart some information, so it was not a consultation”.

Several members of the Forum addressed the council’s Special Meeting of the Finance & Resources Committee on Thursday morning and answered questions from councillors.

The Forum outlined their experiences over the last year as the council considers granting the lease later today. If councillors agree then the South Bridge Resource Centre will be let to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society (EFFS) on a 99-year lease for £1 a year on the basis that EFFS spend millions on the building. EFFS received £7 million from the UK

Government last year for a capital project.

The EFFS CEO Shona McCarthy said: “We are at the final stages of the business case for the overall project and hope to have access to the building from the autumn of this year.” But she pointed out that this funding is now under threat. She said: “I would point out that it’s been a year now in holding to draw down on that investment and I would emphasise that it is now massively at risk.” Ms McCarthy also said that it was always the Fringe’s intention to take on a city building in need of some love and attention.

She explained that the need for a new home was identified in 2017 when we published a blueprint for the Fringe. The current set up is spread over three buildings and deals with around 25,000 enquiries from people around the world. She also said that she had found it quite emotional listening to the deputations. She said that while the Fringe would not be able to house everyone in the building (except Canongate Youth who will have a home on the upper floors) the Society would look at apprenticeships and all kinds of opportunities to engage with young people from across the city. She pointed out that the ambition is for the building to be publicly accessible and she would “love to be able to work with the Adult Learners Forum to explore how we can continue to make that a home for them”.

DEPUTATION CLAIMS NO ENGAGEMENT

The Adult Learners Forum deputation represented those involved in a range of literacy and numeracy classes at the centre where 1,100 people a week pass through the doors engaging in a range of activities. The forum said that any meaningful engagement has only taken place as a result of their initiatives and also said the council had not made repairing the building (now in need of multi-million pound investment) a priority.

“This is in spite of the fact that when adults are involved in learning there are a huge number of benefits to them and their communities both short and long term.”

“We have not been engaged about potential alternatives and this has caused anxiety and disappointment amongst learners.”

The forum places great emphasis on the central location of this building which is accessible by bus and has car parking behind it “vital for accessibility”, but it was also explained that learners attending a central location get away from any stigma of attending these classes at their local community centre. “It provides anonymity that local community centres cannot provide”.

“It is a cost-effective way of offering these specialist services. It acts as a central and initial contact point for getting information on city wide adult learning.”

Another member of the forum pointed out that “On the 25 April 2023 a recommendation to councillors stated that “there is a considerable amount of work required prior to any formal decision by the committee. On the part of the council the existing education programme needs to be relocated without any detriment to the service and this will require engagement and options appraisal”

“This has not been carried out to any meaningful extent. And therefore we believe that no decision can be taken at this time.

In today’s report under recommendation 1.12 councillors are asked to note that for the majority of groups and classes using the building suitable alternative locations have been identified and that engagement has commenced to implement the proposed moves. We challenge that statement.

“It is completely at odds with our experience of the process and we are baffled as to how the council officers can have

identified suitable locations if they have not taken the time to find out what the learners need from those locations.

“We feel that council officials are rushing to conduct an integrated impact assessment. We feel that this is last minute tokenism and a failure to properly consult with all learners in a safe and supported way. Our forum was excluded from a meeting only last week.”

Another member of the deputation said that: “ How can suitable locations have been investigated if there is no understanding of the needs of learners. Edinburgh Council said that if the Fringe takeover South Bridge, then all adult learning activities will continue uninterrupted. We’ve been informed the classes will be moved out by August 2024 but there is no alternative central hub. We don’t want to lose the central location. South Bridge hosts 86 council run adult learning classes each week and outside lets for more learning classes. These are a lifeline. Don’t take this away from us. If you do, the 1100 people accessing South Bridge each week will have their learning their lives and mental health detrimentally affected.

“Think carefully before you hand over a vital community asset and lose the only adult learning centre in Edinburgh forever.”

Cllr Alys Mumford said she regretted that there had been little engagement and asked what the needs of the Forum are now. They replied that the centrality and accessibility of the hub are important. It is about having a place where you can stay around the area afterwards and have a coffee. For the singing group the acoustics are important.

“To be able to mix with other people who are doing other kinds of learning and cross fertilise is really important. We think this is an opportunity to maintain a dynamic and progressive centralised Educational Services hub. It is shortsighted to think these classes could just be parachuted into any

building. These are people from a lot of vulnerable groups. People want to come to a safe place where staff are welcoming and it means the world to people coming to make them feel safe and valued.”

A member of the deputation concluded: “There will be a lot of people falling through the cracks.”

Other deputations were presented by Canongate Youth, The Pottery Users Group (PUG) and Totally Sound Music Project who all currently use the building.

The council will take a decision on this later today – [watch the meeting online live or as a recording here](#).

April 2023 announcement

When we met the Scottish Secretary John Lamont in New York last April we asked about the multi million pound award of capital funding for the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and he confirmed that this money was being awarded to the Fringe Society to “help them develop new premises” and that “more details will be emerging in due course”.

Mr Lamont confirmed to The Edinburgh Reporter that this money was “what the Society had applied for – money to help them develop new headquarters to accommodate all their staff”, and that the funding was a “recognition of the importance of the Fringe not just to Edinburgh and Scotland but also to the rest of the UK”.

Following yesterday's announcement, there's still lots of detail to work through – we're not moving into plush new offices! We'll be able to share more info early next week. We understand the interest in the news, and are working quickly to answer questions that have been asked.

– Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society (@EdFringeSociety) [March 16, 2023](#)

Although the Fringe Society initially said they were not getting “plush new offices” they clarified in a subsequent [statement](#) that indeed they are moving into new premises – which presumably they knew all along if they did apply for the funding as the Minister suggested to us.

The statement said: “Since 2017 in our published blueprint we had also set out an aspiration to have a central community based hub to house the services offered by the Fringe Society, and provide a space for our community partners, artists, visiting arts industry and media.

“The funding announced this week is from the UK Government’s capital investment fund. It is not revenue funding, therefore it is ring-fenced to be used against capital spending only.”

