

Edinburgh festivals come under the Westminster spotlight

In a Westminster Hall debate on Tuesday, Edinburgh's Olympic-sized annual cultural festivals were put under the spotlight in the first discussion on the topic in Westminster since 1992.

Edinburgh East MP, Chris Murray, had secured the debate to consider "the cultural and economic contribution of the Edinburgh festivals" in little more than an hour. Contributions to the debate were made by four of the Edinburgh MPs, all extolling the virtues of the festivals as a platform for culture, and a way of putting Edinburgh firmly on the map along with an economic benefit of at least £407 million to the city reported in 2022. It also gave them an opportunity of mentioning the resignation of the Chief Executive of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society, Shona McCarthy on the same day that it was announced.

At the end of the debate Chris Bryant, Minister of State at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, agreed that he wants to give economic stability to the arts. Whether multi year funding for the cultural sector will be a part of the budget is not yet clear. But he did commit to discuss with the Home Office the point made about cultural visas. And crucially he recognised the need for cooperation among governments. He

said: “It is not just about us: there is a Government in Scotland, and it is also about local government across the whole of the UK. In England, I would argue that it is also about regional mayors, who play a very important part in the creative industries.”

Spotlight

The city came under scrutiny, with everything from rubbish strikes to legislation on short term lets and the tourist tax aired, albeit in the scurrying fashion of such discussions. A Westminster Hall debate is an excellent opportunity to raise local matters directly with a government minister. That Edinburgh was talked about in the UK Parliament is a good thing, although the quick fire contributions could not delve into the details, and some of the local nuance was skated over. The economic advantages of the tourist tax were not discussed at any length – although the underfunding of Edinburgh council was mentioned several times. The council estimates that the tourist tax could raise as much as £50 million a year for its own coffers. [Discussion on what it would be spent on is now out for consultation until 15 December 2024.](#)

The Conservative MP for Gosport Dame Caroline Dinenage talked of the “heavy-handed licensing and prohibitive legislation around short-term lets” without having time to expand on the background of the legislation. The Scottish Government introduced it to combat the need for housing for people who live here permanently, but the introduction of the scheme in Edinburgh has been thwarted by well-funded court actions by the self-catering industry. The city declared itself the country’s first short term let control area following consultation in 2021 and all homes to be used in this way must be licensed by 1 January 2025. A [consultation](#) on how the scheme is working ongoing and ends on Monday.

Murray makes five demands

Chris Murray called for five things to be answered as a result of the debate. He wants multi-year funding to establish economic stability, recognition for the arts and cultural sector so that it does not have to compete for funding each year, cross-UK engagement involving the Scottish Government to whom culture is devolved, as well as local government, the possibility of culture visas for performers and “crisis support”. He suggested this could mean the government plugging the funding gap left by Baillie Gifford ending their support for the Edinburgh International Book Festival.

Mr Murray said: “It is important that Parliament recognises that other countries would give their eye teeth to have what Edinburgh has established in the past 75 years. We fail to polish the cultural jewels in our crown at our peril. We have an opportunity. The potential for the festivals to thrive is right in front of us. The Fringe is opening a new home in the Old Infirmary and the Dunard Centre will add a new modern concert hall to the city’s venues, but the support of public policy is necessary to achieve that.”

The Big Noise

Scott Arthur, MP for Edinburgh South West, said he hoped the new Dunard Centre in St Andrew Square would be a place for people from his constituency to visit as patrons, but that it would also allow groups such as The Big Noise orchestra from Wester Hailes to appear on stage there. He appealed for government investment in the festivals and said: “Investing in the breadth and depth of the festival offering in Edinburgh also helps to spread the tourist economy to the quieter parts of the year. It will help Edinburgh to move upmarket, with visitors staying for longer and spending more. This will mean that working in the tourist economy will be a career for more people—rather than just a summer job—with better pay and

better conditions.”

Christine Jardine the Liberal Democrat MP for Edinburgh West said the festivals enrich the city and its worldwide reputation. But she said that in the capital “We have a strange relationship with the festival.

“We love it—it is the world’s window on us and our chance to show off. However, there is also an underlying tension, which the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) referred to, between the influx of tourists every year—we have also seen that tension in Vienna and Barcelona—and the cost to the city, which has the most underfunded council in the country; the mess when we have strikes which coincide with it; the pressure on our public transport; and the cost of accommodation in Edinburgh, which is now outrageous.

“However, looking at what the festivals bring to the city, I do not think the tensions can be compared with the benefits. Think about where we would be without the £400 million that it brings to the city itself, and the other £300 million it brings to the rest of Scotland when it acts as a tourism gateway. It is a jewel in our cultural crown and we need to preserve it.”

Tracy Gilbert, the MP for Edinburgh North and Leith, said that it was worrying that visitors now spend more money on accommodation and less on public transport, entertainment and food and drink, according to an economic impact study. She also mentioned the exciting cultural developments in Edinburgh such as the Dunard Centre, Customs House in Leith and the soon to open North Edinburgh Arts.

Ricky Demarco got a mention – albeit from a Glasgow MP, Patricia Ferguson. She said: “When it was founded in 1947, the idea was that the festival would be about healing the wounds of war through the language of the arts, which is something that Ricky Demarco did not just talk about but actively

participated in, as he does to this day and encourages others to do the same. That alone is quite a legacy, but it also emphasises the so-called “soft power” of the arts, and I offer that “soft power” as a third reason for supporting the Edinburgh festivals and the arts more generally.”

Watch the whole debate here.

<https://parliamentlive.tv/event/index/dde37b15-b9d4-4321-9866-53fc626347fa>



The Edinburgh International Festival opening event held at George Heriot's School © 2024 Martin McAdam