



Precis of CEC paper “Review of Event Management Operations in Edinburgh – Edinburgh’s Christmas” presented to the Policy and Sustainability Committee on 25 February 2020

The report to the Policy and Sustainability Committee of the City of Edinburgh Council titled “Review of Event Management operations in Edinburgh – Edinburgh’s Christmas” makes interesting, if not informative, reading. The Cockburn’s appraisal of this report could best be summarised as *Business as Usual; nothing to see here*.

A more detailed reading highlights a range of issues and deficiencies, and begs several questions, which we pose below.

Our first issue is the variance between the report and its findings and recommendations and the article that appeared in the Evening News/Scotsman on 19 February titled, “Underbelly may be replaced as Edinburgh’s winter festivals under new drive to protect Princes Street Gardens.” The first sentence in this piece states that “*City Council chiefs have signal they want to scale back a controversial Christmas market in response to growing concerns....*” We can find nothing on the report that even remotely suggests this. Indeed, the same Council chiefs presented a paper to the Culture and Communities Committee only a few weeks ago saying that there is no other single site suitable for the Xmas market.

In appraising the report, it is important to also have the 26 November 2019 paper “Edinburgh’s Christmas – Motion by Councillor Mowat” to hand. This addresses questions about decision-making in terms of both the extension of contract to Underbelly, the Council’s contractor procured to deliver the Winter festivals, and the lack of planning (and other) consents for the Xmas market, which the Cockburn exposed in October. Both of these issues are bypassed in the current 25 February committee paper, which we suggest is a major omission. Whilst we accept that the planning process is still running and must not be prejudiced, public confidence in regulatory requirements must be in the forefront. The same applies to public procurement processes.

Issues, deficiencies and further questions

The sole recommendation to the Policy and Sustainability Committee is to establish a new ‘Festivals and Events All Party Oversight Group’. Is this adequate in addressing the widespread concern about the commodification of the gardens? Will this committee operate in the public eye with papers made public and meetings open to the public and/or telecast for public viewing? How does it relate to the existing internal Events Planning and Operations Group (EPOG)?

The report touches upon the promised major review of the Christmas market but makes no mention of timescale. Is this new Oversight Group intended to replace this? If not, when is it planned to hold this?

Both reports fail to clarify the relationship between the City Council and Underbelly. As we understand it, the Winter Festivals are, indeed, the City Council's event. Underbelly is the contractor commissioned to deliver it. This makes the failure to follow public processes even more concerning as the client is not only the planning authority but also the landowner. If we are right in this, how does the City benefit financially from the event? Are profits from activities such as the pop-up bars shared with the Council?

The role and decisions of individual unnamed officials is an underlying issue throughout the paper. Para 4.9 notes that there is a lack of communication between officers and departments generating unplanned impacts; para 4.10 notes that there is no central controlling voice or mechanism; and para 6.1 suggests a recognition of a serious under-resourcing of management functions. All of this suggests a failure in effective management and leadership. How is it that in a city which heralds itself as the biggest Festival City in the world can find itself in a situation of disconnected management?

The contractual relationship between the City and Underbelly sits at the core of this fiasco. The November 2019 report states Underbelly "had clear duties to manage and run this event and it was their responsibility to apply for planning permission." As we know, they failed in their responsibility to do so. If the contractor failed to meet its contractual obligation to meet statutory and regulatory requirements, what penalties or sanctions did the Council apply? How did it seek to manage its contract? Who was responsible for regulatory compliance?

Summary

There is no question that the management of key aspects of the Christmas Market has been deficient, not least the fact that major infrastructure to facilitate it was erected without planning consent. The relationship between the Council and its contractor also remains somewhat opaque. This Council report and various media articles highlights the lack of clarity in this relationship suggests that the procurement was not as robust as it should be.

The proposed Public Spaces Management Plan approved by the Culture and Communities Committee for consultation in April provides a possible positive avenue for resolving many of the issues that arise from the use of civic space for private or gated activities. Let's hope it is wide enough in its scope to address the widespread public concern about the commodification of Edinburgh's civic assets.

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