RESPONSIBLE TOURISM:
SOLUTIONS FOR EDINBURGH'S FUTURE
JOIN US FOR AN ENGAGING AFTERNOON DISCUSSION ON TOURISM, SUSTAINABILITY AND THE CAPACITY OF THE CITY TO MANAGE AND GROW ITS VISITOR ECONOMY.

30th October
Augustine United Church
41 George IV Bridge
Edinburgh EH1 1EL

And Online!

Supported by Heriot-Watt University's Scottish Confucius Institute for Business & Communication

Report on the proceedings of the "Responsible Tourism: Solutions for Edinburgh's Future" Conference in October 2024

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The Cockburn Association was founded in 1875 to promote and encourage the care and conservation of Edinburgh's unique architectural and landscape heritage.

The Association is one of the oldest conservation, planning and architectural advocacy organisations in the world. It takes its name from Lord Cockburn (1779-1854), a renown Scottish lawyer, judge, and literary figure, who can claim to be one of Scotland's first conservationists. The Cockburn Association's objectives are to promote and encourage the following objects by charitable means but not otherwise: i. the maintenance, improvement, and promotion of the amenity of the City of Edinburgh and its neighbourhoods

ii. the protection, preservation and conservation of the City's landscape and historic and architectural heritage

In 2025, the Cockburn Association will be celebrating its 150th anniversary of protecting and advocating for the city's heritage, civic amenity, and cultural heritage. To celebrate this, we will be organising several events throughout 2025 as well as publishing a book detailing our long history of advocacy and campaigning in Edinburgh.

We are a membership organisation. The best way to support our work is to join us as a member. Visit our website to join today!

thecockburnassociation

Background and Introduction

On Wednesday 30 October 2024, the Cockburn Association convened a half-day conference to discuss the challenges of Overtourism in Edinburgh. In the months leading up to this conference, the Association had noted the volume of press reports coming from the rest of Europe detailing resident led protests in destinations such as Barcelona and Mallorca, pressures on locals in the Cotswolds, and limits on tourist activities in places like Amsterdam and Venice. While observing what seemed to be a tipping point for both the infrastructures and residents of global tourist destinations, the Association found itself once again in the midst of the August festival season, wondering if the city had the capacity to manage ever growing crowds of visitors, or if Edinburgh too would soon reach its tipping point and follow in the footsteps of Barcelona. Concerns regarding this have been raised historically. An article in the Scotsman (03 July 2019) titled "Edinburgh named one of the world's most serious 'overtourism hotpots'" reported that CNN Travel placed Edinburgh ahead of Rome and Barcelona in a report that identified 13 hotspots under the headline "Destination trouble". A City Council report in May 2018, citing an earlier January 2018 report, warning that the city was struggling to cope with the major influx of visitors during peak periods and said "Public perception of the festivals may have reached a level where it represents a strategic risk to the long-term success of the city region." It was more important than ever to address the growing concerns communities face.

The main themes of the conference were around carrying capacity and Responsible Tourism, looking at the issues of undermanagement and imbalance that seem apparent in the city, and across Europe in other heritage cities. It is crucial that Edinburgh, and other cities abroad, are able to identify and consider the capacity of its infrastructures, public spaces, communities, and ecologies to accommodate rising levels of visitors. The objective of this conference was to discuss key considerations and solutions to these issues.

This conference was to operate under two main assumptions; the first being that the tourism industry is a vital part of Edinburgh's economy, as well as an incredible opportunity to share our unique heritage and culture with the world. The second being that Edinburgh has indeed reached a point where new approaches to the management of tourism is of the utmost importance to protect the very things which both tourists and residents love about the city. The aim of this conference was not to debate IF Edinburgh is facing challenges, but rather how can the city address the real pressures it faces in a way that serves its residents, heritage, environment, and tourism industry.

Introduction- Conference Chair Ian Baxter

Professor Baxter opened the conference. He spoke about Heriot Watt University's Confucius Institute, which sponsored the conference. As a university in a major global city, the institute works closely with partners from China. Ian acknowledged the cultural and economic contributions of Chinese tourists to the city.

Ian noted also that tourism comes with its challenges, and stated that over the past few years, the civic, heritage, business, industry, and media have "talked at" one another, but not together about the issues. Ian stated that the conference would hear from a range of experts with the hope of starting a conversation around what a good future for Edinburgh as a major city and tourist destination would look like.

Introduction- Councillor Cammy Day

(Leader of the Edinburgh City Council)

Councillor Day opened the conference as a representative of the Council, speaking about the value of the tourism economy in Edinburgh, citing the 37,000 jobs created by the tourism industry, the £2.2 billion of visitor spending contributed to the economy annually, the support tourism provides to local bars, restaurants, and attractions. Cllr Day also acknowledged that tourism comes at a cost to local authorities and residents. With over 4 million visitors to the city annually, the cost of waste management during the festivals, and the maintenance of the heritage buildings and streets of Edinburgh is costly.

Cllr Day emphasized the need to strike a balance between the benefits and costs of tourism, asking the question "how can we improve the quality of life for residents and contribute to the city's economic goals?". The need for better management and responsible growth was emphasised.

Cllr Day shared the Council's Edinburgh 2030 Tourism Strategy, published in 2020. Cllr Day suggested that one of the ways which the city can manage the impacts of tourism and create investment opportunities for Edinburgh's future is the implementation of a visitor levy from July 2026, and the draft scheme for this was put together following years of engagement with industry as well as the public. The Levy will be at a rate of 5%, capped after seven nights, for all types of paid, overnight accommodation except tent/campervan pitches. There will be no local exemptions.

Councillor Day stated that the objectives of the scheme are to support public services, programmes and infrastructure; Edinburgh's culture, heritage and festivals provision; and the city's visitor economy. Cllr Day then discussed how funds raised by the Levy would be used, with funds allocated to cover Council administration costs and costs for accommodation providers, as well as supporting the city's infrastructure, culture, heritage and events, and destination management. The start date of the scheme is set to be the 24th of July 2026.

First Session- Responsible Tourism

Dr Harold Goodwin

(Managing Director, Responsible Tourism Partnership)

Dr Goodwin opened his contribution to the conference by posing the question "Does Edinburgh have an overtourism problem?" noting Doxey's Irritation Index, which schematically presents the stages of community tolerance as it responds to increasing tourist numbers. However, the residents of a place are diverse, and they will have different and often conflicting feelings about tourism. Harold made a point to avoid giving his own opinion on Edinburgh's unique situation, instead opted to focus on global case studies of overtourism.

Dr Goodwin provided an introduction to Responsible Tourism, overtourism, and provided a theoretical background to some of the potential challenges the city is facing. Dr Goodwin stated that responsible tourism is about achieving sustainability, and that overtourism is seen where hosts and guests feel the destination is being spoilt by the pressures from visitors. Harold emphasized that there are diverse views around tourism, and there are both spatial and temporal effects of tourism.

Dr Goodwin spoke about his experience visiting Prague in 1988, where he would frequently bring tour groups. That year, he stated that he met no Czech citizens in the centre of Prague and felt that the point of visiting was diminished. He felt that it was a destination that was "best to remember the way it was than to visit the way it is now". He argued that tourists make these personal decisions about destinations, and that this phenomenon is difficult to turn around once people begin to feel it.

Dr Goodwin drew attention to the case study of Ludlow, which has been working to enforce and idea that tourists are "temporary residents", implicit to this is that residents contribute to the place.

Harold emphasised that the concept of overtourism is not new, citing the publication of *The Holiday Makers* in 1987, and *Coping with Tourists: European Reactions to Mass Tourism* in 1996. Dr Goodwin spoke about the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, which he argued simply spoke about sustainability, which is not sufficient action. Harold also spoke briefly about the Cape Town Declaration, rewritten in 2022, and the Responsible Tourism Charter.

Dr Goodwin then spoke about the Tragedy of the Commons as a way to understand overtourism, as well as many other issues faced in our world today. This theory comes from grassland ecology and posits that individuals pursue their rational self-interests at the disadvantage of the community as a whole. He argued that we as people tend to forget that we live in a finite world, and destinations themselves are finite. To illustrate this, he pointed to the example of St Mark's Square in Venice, where it is only possible to fit so many people in once day.

Dr Goodwin discussed issues of management, stating that the money must come from somewhere in order to maintain the public realm. He asked the question, "who is a place for?". While private spaces can impose entrance fees and certain limitations, public spaces are more difficult to manage.

Dr Goodwin repeatedly came back to the argument that "overtourism" is a set of complex feeling about what is happening to a place, but it does not give an analysis of what the specific problems are. He emphasized the need for governments to ask themselves if tourism should be allowed to use a

destination, or should tourism be used to benefit residents. He argued that the management of tourism is a question of balance between competing interests.

Dr Goodwin argued that tourism can certainly benefit a place through things like spending power and GVA, employment, building businesses and tax revenue, providing income for museums and the public realm, and reducing outmigration in rural areas. However, there are also costs associated with tourism. He stated that in Europe, one of the primary issues seen is the cost of housing and the supply of accommodation for local people. Other issues include littering, congestion and crowding, and changes in retail offers which is seen clearly in Edinburgh.

Harold argued that while the concept of carrying capacity is often proposed as a solution to Overtourism, a better way of managing tourism is to find the limits of acceptable change. He called for a whole government approach.

Harold also discussed the issue with viewing gross value added (GVA) as a guaranteed benefit of tourism. He pointed to the example of Ghana, which invited their diaspora to return home. Large numbers returned to Ghana, bought houses, and subsequently rented them out for most of the year. Harold argued that in many cases, the money would leave to foreign bank accounts. Therefore, the GVA was not necessarily benefitting the local population or place.

Dr Goodwin emphasized the importance of involving local citizens in decisions about tourism and city management. He also stated that this conference was the first event outside of Barcelona he has seen that has brought together different stakeholders in one venue, something which he believes is an important part of the process towards responsible tourism solutions. He concluded by emphasising that to provide more enjoyable experiences, there must be a general respect between visitors and locals, and management should focus on building local pride by contributing to the destination in a meaningful way.

Caroline Warburton

(Destination Development Director, VisitScotland)

Caroline began by introducing VisitScotland and their approach to responsible tourism. VisitScotland works to ensure that all parts of Scotland are able to benefit from tourism. Caroline stated that the primary vision of VisitScotland is to grow the value of the visitor economy to Scotland, and that the organisation seeks to achieve this through a responsible approach. Ultimately, VisitScotland recognises that responsible tourism is achievable when it contributes to making better places for people to live in, which in turn creates better places for people to visit.

Globally, international tourism is now back to pre-pandemic levels and continues to be an extremely competitive market. Scotland is currently outperforming the rest of the UK in terms of international visitor numbers, however as a nation we are competing with every other global destination for visitors' attention and visits. She emphasised that the trends are not all positive, pointing to the UK cost-of-living crisis which is having an impact on the domestic market. Both domestic and international visitors contribute significantly to tourism across the country. In general, the volume of visitors from the UK is higher than international, however on average UK visitors spend less. They are however more loyal

visitors to Scotland, visiting more frequently and exploring more areas of the country. Caroline highlighted that the sector is also seeing the impacts of the climate emergency, which is seeing changes in consumer behaviour, new regulations affecting business delivery, and very directly, the need for business to be more resilient in the face of extreme weather events.

Caroline went on to discuss the ways that VisitScotland is delivering its approach to responsible tourism. This is directed through four activity areas and four areas where VisitScotland can exert most influence.

The four themes are supporting Scotland's transition to a low carbon economy; ensuring tourism and events are inclusive to all; ensuring tourism and events contribute to thriving communities; and, supporting the protection and considerate enjoyment of Scotland's natural and cultural heritage. The four areas of influence are the organisation's own management of their carbon impact. This is then followed by visitors, through VisitScotland's marketing, industry and finally, destinations and communities.

VisitScotland's influence on visitors is largely through marketing and communications, positioning Scotland as an inclusive, year-round destination to encourage visits during the "off season". This also extends to identifying key markets and audiences by engaging with the visitors who will bring the most value to Scotland and encouraging them to travel sustainably. The final visitor engagement goal is to increase the value per visit by encouraging longer stays and increased spending.

The third area of influence is with the tourism industry itself. VisitScotland publishes consumer trends, available on their website, to assist businesses with their appeal to visitors and ways to strengthen and support their performance. Trends show that visitors value opportunities to engage with local people and communities and want to make a positive contribution to a destination. VisitScotland also offers marketing advice for businesses to reach the right markets and create business resilience. Caroline illustrated this with the example of Tourism Cares, a US nonprofit which is aimed at the tourism industry by providing a "Meaningful Tourism" map. Scotland is the first European destination to appear on the map, and two local Edinburgh businesses, Mercat Tours and Invisible City Tours, are featured.

The final area of influence is on destinations and communities themselves. Caroline drew attention to management and capacity issues faced in many rural areas during the pandemic which have struggled to cope with increasing visitor numbers, and emphasised a need for collaboration between communities, governments, and organisation to manage visitor numbers in certain areas. Caroline highlighted a couple of local initiatives in Edinburgh which VisitScotland is engaged in, such as the Forth Bridges Trail and the UNESCO Heritage Trail, which highlights Scotland's 14 UNESCO designations across the country. She also discussed initiatives to encourage travel by train or cycle, and finding eco-friendly places to stay across Scotland.

VisitScotland measures its responsible tourism through the "Four S's"; **spread** or ensuring that every part of Scotland benefits from tourism, **spend,** which focuses on the spread of economic contribution, **seasonality**, or ensuring that visitors are attracted to visit during all times of the year as opposed to only during the summer high season, and finally **satisfaction** of visitors, communities and businesses.

Professor J John Lennon

(Principal and Founder, JJ Lennon Tourism Development Consultancy Ltd.)

Professor J John Lennon began his presentation by discussing Edinburgh's success in the tourism industry and utilising the Oxford English Dictionary definition of overtourism as "an excessive number of tourist visits to a popular destination or attraction, resulting in damage to the local environment and historical sites, and in poorer quality of life for residents". John pointed out that while Edinburgh has the best occupancy and room rates in the UK next only to London, issues such as overcrowding, litter, infrastructure limitations, the housing crisis, rental inflation, and damage to natural and built heritage were significant and not to be ignored.

John discussed the visitor levy, pointing out that no such levy legislation exists in England currently. John moved to address some of the anti-levy arguments he has seen, particularly from the tourism industry itself, which were primarily concerned with two issues: taxation and competitiveness. Accommodation operators opposing the levy argue that they already pay corporation taxes, tax on earnings, VAT, business rates, and personal taxes. However, Professor Lennon noted that Scottish Government define the visitor levy not as a further tax on business but rather a levy on consumers. Other arguments around the issue of taxation suggest that a visitor levy will fall most heavily on domestic tourists as they are the predominant visitor group to Edinburgh. John noted that taxation is a part of functioning democracy and the impacts of visitors on a destination are not only the result of international tourists.

Professor Lennon noted sentiments from hoteliers who argue that a visitor levy would make the city less competitive by making alternative destinations appear cheaper and diluting visitor appeal due to UK's already high VAT rates. John countered these points with several useful data sets. The proposed visitor levy of 5% is much lower than other destinations, for example New York has a rate of 14.7%. Regarding VAT, Scotland is not in fact the most expensive in Europe, places such as Rome, Budapest, Barcelona, Dublin, and Helsinki all have higher VAT rates. Professor Lennon suggested that the issue of destination competitiveness is not valid. Further, John pointed out that levies are shown to have only a marginal impact on the levels of visitation to destinations; the proposed visitor levy, at 5%, is unlikely to deter most visitors. While the income from a visitor levy may be used to help fund urban improvements and the management of a city infrastructure; the impacts from large numbers of visitors will still be present.

Professor Lennon briefly discussed the issue of cruise ships visitors to Edinburgh and their growth. The local authorities have invested in ports and harbour infrastructure. However, John argued that a cruise ship tourist expenditure is amongst the least economically attractive to a destination. They have limited propensity to purchase accommodation, food, or beverages, and retail expenditure is limited due cabin size. Recent data from Venice indicated cruise ship passengers' expenditure per capita was circa €4 – essentially the price of a bottle of water.

John then moved to discuss how the visitor levy will be utilised and its economic impact. He highlighted data from Edinburgh local authority website which suggested that in the first three years it

would generate £144.7 M of revenue[1]. This figure was the most pessimistic estimation offered by the City website As Councillor Day discussed in his presentation, the funds generated from the levy will be spent on administrative costs and contingency, participatory budgeting, city operations, visitor management, as well as significant funding (circa £5m for housing and tourism mitigation) .

Professor Lennon made the important point, reiterating Dr Goodwin's message, that what is good for residents is also frequently good for tourists. John noted how iconic global festivals are increasingly becoming visitor events with local residents decreasing as a market share. Furthermore, there is recent evidence of visitors becoming fatigued by busy, capital destinations and showing increasing interest in secondary destinations.

He then discussed carrying capacity, which for physical and infrastructural issues can be calculated. However, social and cultural carrying capacity is much harder to calculate. This includes elements such as limits of acceptable change in areas, pace of daily life for residents, the balance of sectoral employment, and changes in cultural activities and behaviours. Professor Lennon cited Disney parks as an example of the private sector managing capacity through limiting ticketing and increasing facilities. Notably, Edinburgh Castle capped visitor attendance at circa 1.2 million annually. However, not all areas of the tourism or tourism-related sector manage capacity in this manner. Professor Lennon cited airlines, hotels, and online consolidators of private supply, (such as Airbnb) as actors in a market economy where success is measured by increased profitability, continuous sales, and extending shareholder return.

Professor Lennon posed the critical question: 'Should the maximisation of the economic impact and profitability from tourism be our primary concern?'. He suggested that instead we must recognise the true costs of unrestricted travel such as litter, pollution, sewage capacity, and damage to built and natural heritage. Further, John suggested that the economic impact might be overstated, briefly discussing how a proportion of income from hotel chain franchises never enter the UK, citing IHG and Airbnb wherein commissions of circa 20% leave the UK. Professor Lennon ended his presentation by referencing the UN World Tourism Organisation's (UNWTO) embracing of the Sustainable Development Goals and their application to tourism, noting the impetus from UNWTO to consider the social and environmental impacts of tourism, not just the economic.

Panel #1 Discussion Summary

Panellists joining:

Angela Giancola (Guide, Edinburgh Castle, former Sustainability Officer, Historic Environment Scotland)

Patrick Keady (Licensed Home sharer, Edinburgh Old Town. Community Councillor)

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[1] Assuming an introduction in mid-2026 (from 1 July 2026), a 5% levy capped at seven consecutive nights will raise up to the following in Edinburgh: £30-34 million for July 2026 to March 2027; £43-46 million in 2027/28 and £45-50 million in 2028/29 (Edinburgh City Council).

The panel began with introductions from Angela Giancola and Patrick Keady. Angela works at Edinburgh Castle, managed by Historic Environment Scotland (HES) which manages over 300 sites across Scotland. Angela pointed out that one of the main issues faced is managing visitor numbers to the castle. Before Covid, the castle was seeing an unsustainable level of growth. Since then, HES has limited visits to 8,000 per day which has had a positive impact on the visitor experience, staff wellbeing, and HES' ability to protect the cultural asset itself. Techniques used to manage visits include timed tickets to spread visitors throughout the day, as well as initiatives such as Historic Sundays which from October to March offer free entry to all historic sites for Scottish residents to better engage with the local community. Patrick is a former director of the NHS in England. In 2015, he moved to Scotland and became a licensed home sharer in his tenement flat in the City Centre. He lives in the property alongside his guests and meets with them every morning over breakfast. Patrick discussed how changing in licensing since last September has meant he has seen a decrease in the number of STLs in his block, meaning he now has more local, permanent neighbours and a stronger sense of community. Patrick also participated in the Destination Development course at Napier University.

The panel discussions began with the question of "why responsible tourism" as opposed to sustainable tourism. Harold argued that often sustainability is used as a buzzword without real action. Caroline suggested that responsibility is a powerful term as everyone has a part to play, and the role of the industry to work and grow responsibly is clearer. Angela agreed with this statement, stating that responsibility encourages all organisations and individuals to act.

The issue of pedestrianisation was briefly discussed. Harold pointed to the case study of Barcelona, where tables were moved off pavements and into the roads, thereby narrowing roads, introducing one ways and child play areas in the centre of the city. John discussed that pedestrianisation in Edinburgh has been a slow process, and suggested this may be due to the revenue of parking payments going towards the council.

Panellists then discussed to what extent tourism can be described as an extractive industry. An audience comment compared Edinburgh to an oil field, emphasising that once lost, we cannot recreate what it has. Harold used the example of the Swiss mountain landscape and the damage it has suffered due to ski tourism. He pointed out that there are other models of tourism that are not extractive, citing the example of Karola, India, where the tourism industry is largely focused on locally owned businesses and home shares. He emphasised that tourism is what we make it as consumers and producers, and that we have choices in what tourism can mean for our city. John argued that tourism is extractive without a doubt, and the question is in how tangible the impacts are, citing the physical infrastructural impacts but also the less quantifiable social and cultural impacts.

The festivals were briefly discussed after an audience member asked the question "what can be done to make the Fringe for us and not [something that happens] to us?". Caroline pointed out that the festivals were originally intended to extend the season past the Scottish school holidays. Caroline argued that the Fringe is working to disperse activity around the city, although the question remains if this is accurately addressing resident's wants and needs. She also pointed out that a high percentage

of tickets are bought by locals and many locals do benefits and enjoy the Fringe[2]. Patrick discussed concerns around the evolution of "mega festivals and events" where growth is unfettered.

The panel discussed if there was a need for Edinburgh to have a destination management organisation (DMO) to progress the objectives of responsible tourism and foster community engagement. Caroline discussed that DMOs vary in their objectives depending on the location, some are involved in marketing, others in management, and most are involved in industry engagement and representation. She also pointed out that it is costly to set up an independent organisation like a DMO. Harold made the point that the need for and effectiveness of a DMO is dependent on who controls the organisation and what their KPIs are. John argued that a DMO's involvement with the management of tourism is a myth, as they cannot manage something they do not own or control.

The use of funds raised by the visitor levy was a main discussion point throughout the panel. A member of the audience expressed their displeasure with the amount of litter and graffiti seen in Edinburgh. Caroline pointed out that public realm management is a part of the visitor levy proposals from the Council. She also noted that Edinburgh is not the only place in Scotland with these issues. Angela discussed her experience at Edinburgh Castle, stating that visitors are typically conscious and rarely litter, and that this is influenced by the availability of appropriate infrastructure. If it exists, visitors will use it. Patrick emphasized the importance in public engagement when decisions are made regarding how the money will be spent, and John reiterated that the visitor levy expenditures are available. He expressed his concern that taxation is not being appropriately put back into the tourism industry.

Another main issue discussed by the panel was the collection and use of data to manage issues. Caroline and Harold both emphasized that while data is useful, it is important to first identify the issue that needs to be addressed, and then identify what data is needed to manage the issue. Caroline hopes that the visitor levy will provide better data as businesses will need to provide information on occupancy and places will need to be registered to pay the levy. John made the point that information is power, and discussed issues surrounding the accessibility of data from companies such as Airbnb on their finances whose data is well disguised and difficult to interpret. He also discussed that collating data is often not a priority, particularly during economic downturns, and this has effects on how useful of a data tool is. Patrick drew attention to an example of data being utilised to measure progress, citing findings from the Sunday Times that prior to the pandemic, 29% of homes in the city centre were STLs, whereas now, according to the planning applications, that number is down to 10%[3].

There was some discussion around the role of the local council in addressing the question of responsible tourism. Harold suggested that exploring how other destinations around the world have handled their unique issues may provide some guidance or insight into how we can manage our set of concerns in Edinburgh. Caroline emphasised the need for the Council to continue engaging with different stakeholders and communities, arguing that when the topic of tourism becomes polarised, we might begin to see protests like those in Spain. John gave several suggestions for the Council to act on, such as pedestrianisation, halting new accommodation development, limiting or banning cruise

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[2] According to the Fringe Society, 33% of Fringe tickets in 2023 were sold to Edinburgh residents, and 15% to residents from the rest of Scotland. 800,000 tickets were issued to buyers from EH postcodes.
[3] The exact number of STLs is contested, although according to Edinburgh Council, there are 3,350 fewer secondary lets listed on Airbnb than there were in 2019.

landings, and increasing regulations. Caroline had mentioned earlier in the panel that cruise ships are not included in the visitor levy, although the Council is consulting on this. She argued that the cruise sector must be further debated. John suggested a new model for museums and galleries where they might begin to charge visitors, while maintaining their free entry policy for locals, in order to help fund these venues which are not supported sufficiently by their retails and hospitality offerings. He also suggested that regarding business tourism, meetings and conferences should be encouraged to take place online where possible.

Second Session- Capacity Management

Donald Emslie

(Chair, Edinburgh Tourism Action Group)

Donald began by giving a brief introduction to the Edinburgh Tourism Action Group (ETAG) which is an umbrella organisation that is made up of representatives from businesses across the Visitor Economy like the airport, hotel association, Historic Scotland, the Chambers of Commerce, tourist guides, the Federation of Small Businesses, and several other stakeholders. The central mission is to ensure that everyone has a voice and works together to deliver sustainable growth for the businesses of Edinburgh and provide good experiences for visitors and residents.

Donald gave a background on the 2020 Tourism Strategy, written by ETAG and commissioned by the Council, which was published in 2012. Donald argued that this strategy was unashamedly about growth, with goals to grow the visitor numbers by a third. This was an incredibly successful strategy in terms of achieving growth, however the management of the city and the growth of the city became out of balance, particularly around 2019 but pointed out that Edinburgh had a capacity issue at certain times of the year and in some places across the city and that we all had to work together to rebalance the impact of the visitor. The Covid pandemic reshaped ETAG's work to focus on assisting recovery post pandemic. Donald emphasised the need for stakeholders to work together to understand and address the impacts of a successful visitor economy while creating a city that is desirable to live and work in in the future.

Donald highlighted the success and scale of Edinburgh's tourism industry with several figures. In 2023, Edinburgh saw 2.3 million international visitors, 2.7 million domestic visitors, with overnight visitors spending 2.24 billion in the city. The industry supports around 2,000 businesses. There are 17,353 beds in the city with another 3,000 in the pipeline, and 1,772 full and part-time licensed STLs not including hostels. Edinburgh in 2023 saw an additional 8m day visitors annually. Managing the impacts of the large visitor numbers is a key task of the city and tourism industry.

ETAG was commissioned to produce the 2030 tourism strategy which varies significantly from the 2020 strategy in terms of its aims. The strategy considers Scotland Outlook 2030, the national strategy for responsible tourism, and considers climate action and the city's economic plan. The 2030 strategy focuses on supporting strong and sustainable economic growth through five strategic pillars:

people, place, environment, partnerships, and reputation. There are five strategic outcomes the plan aims to deliver: a thriving visitor economy, fair work with more and better jobs, ongoing investment in the city, a journey to net zero, and an improved quality of life for residents.

The action plan for the first few years of the strategy was delayed due to Covid but is now underway and is structured as a hub and spoke model, where six key themes make up the spokes: net zero, fair work recruitment and retention, visitor management, business engagement and support, data, AI and technology, and destination management and promotion. For each spoke, advisory groups of experts have been set up to set aims and objectives in alignment with the visitor strategy. The Edinburgh Visitor Economy Partnership was created as the hub and is focused on coordinating action. The Council, industry, universities and VisitScotland are involved in this action plan.

ETAG leads on business engagement across all of the spokes and works to give businesses the tools to reach the strategic outcomes. Donald highlighted Forever Edinburgh's marketing work to promote the city as a destination and encourage visitors to experience places outside of the city centre. Donald highlighted the importance of successful visitor management to protect the environment, and respect local communities which in turn improved the visitor experience and encourages visitors to return to the city.

Donald also spoke about work being done alongside the Edinburgh Futures Institute (EFI) which has been utilising new technologies and data sources to help improve the flow of visitors across the city. New methods using satellite data and tracking where people connect to the city's Wi-Fi has been a useful tool in identifying tourism hotspots, which can be used to inform marketing of attractions to disperse visitors going forward. ETAG also is working to collate the data collected by its members into one source which can be used to inform decision and policy making.

Donald briefly discussed the visitor levy, emphasising the importance of spending the projected £40-50 million annually from this to be relevant to the 2030 strategy objectives. Donald argued that the significant funds that will be raised by the levy require ambitious plans.

Donald concluded his presentation by discussing how ETAG and other stakeholders will measure the success of the 2030 strategy. He emphasised that while achieving sustainable growth is an essential goal to support businesses and Edinburgh's economy, the most important consideration is the people of Edinburgh. The plan will be a success when there are visible and tangible improvements to residents' day to day lives. Donald also stressed the importance of continual conversations with local groups and community councils to ensure that resident voices and needs are heard.

Dr Julian Grant

(Freelance Heritage Interpreter. Board Member, Scottish Community Heritage Alliance)

Introduction

Dr Grant began by stating that as a resident of Edinburgh with an academic background in tourism research, the question of how to responsibly manage tourism in this city is close to his mind and heart. His PhD research with the University of the Highlands and Islands was focused on the impact of the North Coast 500 touring route on local communities. Drawing from ethnography and participatory

research methodologies, Julian sought to put local people at the centre of the study by focusing on individual residents' everyday experiences, opinions and actions rather than macro-scale patterns and statistics. This approach explored tourism from within, as expressed in people's own words and on their own terms.

At the Cockburn Association's conference on responsible tourism, Dr Grant shared findings from his PhD, drawing connections with the situation in Edinburgh and set out several prompts for further action. He hoped that his research may inspire a more community-centred way of understanding the complex impacts of tourism locally, and (beyond that) point towards next steps to address residents' needs and concerns.

Methodology

Julian's research was focused on three case studies around the route of the NC500: in Castletown (Caithness), the Seaboard Villages (Easter Ross), and Assynt (Sutherland). In each place, Julian partnered with a local heritage organisation to deliver a community-generated research project. Working from the loose prompt of exploring their personal relationships with tourism, place and heritage, local participants took photographs with disposable film cameras as they went about their daily lives. They discussed the meanings behind their photos in a series of interviews and group discussions, and then selected images and wrote captions to go into public exhibitions held locally and online. This process was repeated in each case study, together giving a rich and multi-faceted view of how local people around the route interpret the presence of tourism in their lives.

Findings

Across the varied perspectives shared by participants in the research, several themes emerge which provide a clearer understanding of the NC500's complex local impacts. The first is that the NC500 has exceeded the carrying capacities of its host communities. Its high-volume, fast-moving visitor flows have exposed an acute shortage of important infrastructure, such as car parks, waste disposal facilities, public toilets and campgrounds. The increased attention brought by the NC500 has also compounded a rural housing crisis. Locals (particularly young people and those on limited incomes) struggle to find a place to live due to the proliferation of holiday lets, second homes and incomers with greater financial resources.

There is also a sense of disenfranchisement associated with the NC500. Residents feel that important decisions about their communities' future are being taken by powerful people who stand to profit from increased tourism, with little regard for the on-the-ground consequences for ordinary people. Several participants highlighted a lack of consultation, while others felt that the NC500 (whose majority shareholder is Scotland's largest landowner and wealthiest individual) has exacerbated inequalities of wealth and power in the region.

A third theme concerns the cultural narratives used to promote the NC500. Through social media and marketing, the NC500 reinforces a view of the Highlands as a romanticised wilderness, a scenic backdrop for enjoyment and fantasy, rather than a complex network of living, working communities with their own self-understandings. This translates into a blindness towards local realities, and by

extension a failure to recognise that the cumulative impacts of tourism can have severe consequences on host communities.

Finally, local residents are not passive. They have responded to the problems posed by the NC500 through protest, advocacy and adaptation. These include: 1) individual acts of resistance (such as blocking off laybys used by overnight campers); 2) campaigns spreading awareness of issues and pushing for policy changes; 3) local initiatives to provide improved visitor facilities; and 4) activities by heritage volunteers, artists and community groups who create alternative, locally-generated narratives of place and past.

Parallels with Edinburgh

The focus on local residents' experiences demonstrates a fundamental tension between an agenda of unchecked growth and a more holistic array of priorities associated with the long-term sustainability and quality of life of local communities. There are clear parallels between the situation around the NC500 and that here in Edinburgh. Complaints from the North Highlands will be familiar to people who have struggled through the overcrowded and messy streets of the Old Town during summer, or observed short-term lets replace neighbours in tenement closes. These pressures are interwoven with the city's acute housing crisis and wider cutbacks to public services, which particularly affect working-class communities.

As demonstrated in this conference, there is a growing consensus that tourism levels in Edinburgh have crossed a crucial tipping point. Julian expressed a hope that his PhD research establishes a precedent for academics, policymakers and tourism professionals to be empathetic and attentive to grassroots local responses to tourism. Through them we can better understand what challenges residents face, and how they envision alternative forms of tourism than the ones which currently exist - perhaps ones that are more sustainable, democratic and mutually beneficial.

Next steps

Building upon the foundations established in his research, Julian closed with a set of prompts for further action on tourism in Edinburgh.

1. **Develop a more nuanced and resident-driven approach to understanding tourism impacts.** Recognising that tourism is not just an economic phenomenon, future work should consider the wider social and cultural dimensions of tourism as they are experienced from the perspective of local residents. Instead of treating local input as a "box-ticking" exercise, we need sensitive qualitative research that actively and respectfully involves local residents in the process of generating knowledge.

2. **Challenge the agenda of growth at all costs.** It should not be assumed that "a rising tide lifts all boats". Julian's research shows that some are well-positioned to profit from the growth of tourism, but others see few of its benefits while bearing the wider costs. Instead of measuring success in terms of increased visitor numbers and overall spend, we should aim towards striking a more sustainable balance with the wider needs of the city's residents. This could include introducing caps on visitor accommodation supply and curbing the scale of festival-related activities.

3. **Ensure that local residents are placed at the heart of tourism policy.** Edinburgh suffers from the market-driven reorientation of much-needed housing, infrastructure and services towards satisfying visitor demand rather than meeting acute social needs. Concrete action is needed to reverse this trend and put the interests of local residents first. The licensing scheme for short-term lets and the Transient Visitor Levy are welcome steps in the right direction. While recognising the complexity of interests involved, it is important that future policy go further in channelling residents' demands. We might consider stricter enforcement on unlicensed short-term lets and expanded levies to fund improved public services.

4. **Bring the lived realities of contemporary Edinburgh residents into the line of sight of tourists.** As a counterbalance to top-down, profit-driven strategies for place promotion, cultural policy should foster the involvement of local people in the creation of new place-narratives reflecting their own diverse histories, experiences and cultural practices. This means supporting grassroots heritage and art, recognising and celebrating working-class local voices and protecting institutions such as the People's Story Museum.

Dr Louise Todd

(Associate Professor, Edinburgh Napier University. Deputy Lead, Tourism Research Centre)

Dr Todd's presentation included the following aspects of this project conducted by members of the Tourism Research Centre as part of a project funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh:

- Aim: How can Edinburgh's tourism and festivals sectors deliver sustainable community engagement?
- Scope: Research investigates secondary stakeholders' engagement with Edinburgh's historic centre.
- Approach: Interviews with key informants, and co-designed participatory and creative workshops with further stakeholders.
- Outcomes: Issues and solutions; reflections on examples of good practice.

Dr Todd's presentation aimed to summarise her research. Full findings will be available in due course.

Process and methods

In February to April 2024, interviews were undertaken with key stakeholders of Edinburgh's tourism and festivals sectors. These allowed us to develop initial themes around Edinburgh's tourism context, placemaking, and to gain an understanding of the issues associated with the term overtourism. The interviews were followed by two participatory action research (PAR) workshops held in May and June 2024. These involved invited stakeholders in a co-designed series of discussions and activities to co-create data around the initial interview themes. These workshops involved visual facilitation (drawing and photography) to capture the co-created data, alongside mapping and placemaking exercises. See an example of the illustrations at end of the report. A third Public Engagement workshop in September 2024 was attended by stakeholder attendees from Edinburgh's Capital Group to disseminate project themes; findings around issues and good practice; and to discuss potential solutions.

Analysis and findings

The project team is currently completing the data analysis process and intends to produce a series of outputs based on the findings. The initial findings of this project have uncovered specific aspects of context; issues; examples of good practice; and potential solutions.

Context

- Historic centre: specific space and place aspects.
- A living city with numerous stakeholders, often with competing interests.
- Emergence of critical media and community-centred discourses.
- Challenging landscape for businesses, visitors and residents.

Issues

- Overtourism: Clarification is needed on what issues Edinburgh faces.
- Lack of connection between fabric and communities.
- 'Pinch-points' lead to safety issues.
- Too many events and lack of communication, partner decisions impacting on others.
- Community engagement: how to manage communication and conflict?
- The echo chamber: how to broaden and widen voices?
- Tourism pressures are not dispersed evenly across space and time.
- Infrastructure not fit for purpose.
- Negative media: We must work to shift perceptions and collaborate more.

Solutions

- Better communication of positives and benefits.
- Align perceptions with reality.
- Consistency of message: Linking policy and strategy.
- Collaboration Clarification of roles and responsibilities.
- Work together for quality not quantity.
- Integrated decisions and communications.
- Community Collective need for champions for solutions and communities.
- Representative and functional groups.
- Instil pride in communities – neighbours and neighbourhoods.

Examples of best practice - not a definitive list, just a start….

- Castlehill Partnership
- Edinburgh World Heritage Visitor Management Plan: Demonstrates successful consultation
- Forever Edinburgh links to residents
- Day in Edinburgh project
- Grassmarket Community Centre: A successful social enterprise offering community spaces and workshops.
- Hidden Door Festival: Grassroots community utilising historic buildings and promoting local arts.

Dr Todd shared that she intends to publish the full project findings in due course. She also plans to explore these issues and solutions further in the future and are in the process of speaking with potential stakeholder partners and collaborators to co-design strategic approaches in placemaking and to further investigate solutions and good practice, to contribute to strategic planning in future tourism and placemaking. Please get in touch if you'd like to participate a.leask@napier.ac.uk or l.todd@napier.ac.uk

Panel #2 Discussion Summary

Panellists joining:

Elin Williamson (Head of Business Growth and Inclusion, Edinburgh City Council)

Meg Bishop (Organising Member, Living Rent)

The second panel discussion began with introductions from Meg Bishop and Elin Williamson who joined the speakers to discuss carrying capacity. Elin is the head of Business Growth and Inclusion at the City of Edinburgh Council and the senior officer working on the visitor levy. She emphasised the City's work to engage locals with the industry. Meg is a geography masters student researching the housing crisis and its impacts on community and how people organise in their communities and joined the panel as a representative for Living Rent, Scotland's tenants union. She made the point that the tourism industry puts pressure on Edinburgh which is already a housing constrained city.

The first discussion point was the summer festivals. An audience member expressed a view that local experiences with the festivals are often negative. Donald addressed this by acknowledging issues of congestion, but pointed to the statistic that 70-80% of tickets are sold to UK residents, and that half of those sales are local to Edinburgh. He also discussed that many locals are supporters of the festivals, and initiatives such as the EH post code discounts and work with local arts groups encourage resident involvement with the festivals. Elin discussed the issue of managing the festivals, a difficult task given that they are all individual organisations with their own objectives and interests. Elin expressed the importance of maintaining the festivals and their benefits while ensuring that they do not get "out of control". Louise made the point that the Fringe was set up with the ethos of local accessibility, ensuring that everyone can take part. However, larger organisations are able to participate, and this can exclude local performers who do not have the same means. She also mentioned Festivals Edinburgh, which is the umbrella organisation which works to ensure that the individual festivals work together. Louise also mentioned that while some of the larger festivals may have international audiences, festivals such as the Science Festival are largely designed for locals.

Panel discussions then moved on to explore the cost of accommodation in the city and the issue of short term lets (STLs). Meg shared her personal experience of being priced out of the city and made the point that regarding the Fringe, many performers also struggle to afford accommodation which

limits local access to the festivals. She also made the point that while the festivals bring jobs, many people working temporary jobs for the festivals cannot afford to participate themselves.

Julian brought up the theme of the privatisation of public space and shared resources, something which was visible during his research in the North Highlands as well as in his personal experience living in Edinburgh. He argued that the profits from tourism are often not inflected in the reality of residents' experiences. He discussed the closure of several community centres across the city, arguing that we need to challenge where profits are going and ensure they are directed towards locals.

Regarding STLs and licensing in the city, both Meg and Elin highlighted the confusion around available data and the need to be critical of data sources. A lack of reliable data makes it difficult to identify and address issues. Meg stated that since the STL licensing scheme, the number of self-catering units has increased. Further, these numbers are only reflective of rate pay self-catering units and do not cover all STLs. Meg gave a figure that Airbnb has just under 6,000 properties listed in the city[4]. She argued that while STLs are not the only contributor to the housing crisis, they may be the "straw that breaks the camel's back".

Donald emphasised a need to make a distinction between Airbnb and professional self-catering companies which have existed for decades and provide a useful resource for visitors. Both Donald and Elin stressed that regulation of the market is essential.

The final discussion point was community engagement. The question of how the industry and council are working to communicate with and learn from community councils and individual residents was raised, as well as the question of how actions will tangibly benefit locals. Louise discussed her research which highlighted a need for more open communication between groups. Elin defended the Council's spending plans for the visitor levy, making the point that funds will be restricted for use for visitor experiences. However, she discussed that the Council is working to explore ways to invest in things which will benefit the residents as well, citing examples such as cleaning litter, graffiti, and investing in public safety. She also highlighted that the Council has conducted several engagement sessions, and surveys, as well as the ongoing open consultation to ensure that community voices have a say in how the levy is spent. Donald argued that the industry has not done enough in the past to engage with locals, a point which was demonstrated when Elin asked the audience to raise their hands if they had heard of the Council's Forever Edinburgh programme and no hands were raised.

Julian shared that his research found that communication needs to come with action. He observed a frustration in locals when action was not being seen to take place, and an abdication from responsibility of those who profit from tourism. An example of this is NC500 Limited, which has an ethos that their responsibility is to draw tourists in, and management is the responsibility of locals and local governments. He expressed his opinion that the visitor levy will ensure that locals are not faced with the burden of managing the impacts of tourism.

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[4] Inside Airbnb, a website which collects data on Airbnb listings in cities across the world, reports that there are 5,780 Airbnb listings in Edinburgh.

As a final point, Donald discussed ETAG's work to collect data from their members as a means of better communicating with locals and stakeholders. If groups work with one another, the reach of communication will be strengthened.

Executive Summary and Conclusions- Professor Ian Baxter

As a capital city, Edinburgh is a dynamic thriving community and a hub of business, cultural and educational activity. By virtue of its geography, history, culture, civic development and economy the city has attained iconic status for something else - that palpable "essence" combining both tangible and intangible elements, that make it a melting pot and lightning rod for debate of issues that matter. There is perhaps no more visible issue at specific times of the year than tourism and how it affects the experience of the city for both visitors and residents alike. It is about more than just the influx of visitors itself and the effect this has though: tourism is a complex phenomenon requiring a nuanced understanding of the interdependencies, interrelationships and interactions of tourists, visitors, residents, businesses, policy makers, civic authorities - the stakeholders with the environment or 'place'. Each constituent part of the ecosystem has its own requirements and desires for it to thrive, but those constituent parts may at times compete or impact negatively, and cause pressure elsewhere in the system. Monitoring and maintaining balance is not an easy task requiring responsibilities and challenges to be understood, discussed and efforts made for consensus which benefits all.

The lightning rod nature of the city however means that views are often at odds with each other, and there has been a tendency for stakeholders over the past few years to set out their stalls, talk at each other, and sometimes gnash their teeth rather than collaboratively think through the really hard stuff for the long term, taking fully into account the wider interdependencies of tourism within the wider 'health' of the city which has a wider range of priorities and needs. The pandemic was supposed to be the big reset - with hopes for a new approach - but some have felt that the dream has faded as the economic realities and requirements have seen the previously recognised pressures and bugbears resurface. The opportunity therefore to spend a whole day bringing multiple viewpoints and understandings together with ample opportunity for discussion and debate was seized by the Cockburn Association. Under the label of what is dubbed 'responsible tourism', participants began to scratch the surface of how we understand and what we want for tourism in the city, and to learn from case studies and research approaches that can enlighten better understandings of the relationships between hosts and guests, people and place. From the range of speakers, we heard hard facts, economic arguments, comparative approaches, consequences of tourism, policy intentions, practical experiences, and participative approaches which surfaced shared desires for tourism to contribute positively but flagged competing challenges where fault lines have or could develop.

Discussion and debate from the floor was lively and passionate as all conference participants came with experience of different aspects of tourism and living or 'being' in the city as a stakeholder. It was perhaps the first time that we got beyond talking at toward talking with each other, and the solutions that the conference title vaunted are therefore perhaps far more subtle than headline. What is clear is that more discussion like this is needed; more of the issues need unpacking in as thoughtful a way as demonstrated in the day; and that deeper methods of understanding the tourism ecosystem need to

be deployed in the city. At the Cockburn Association's prompt, the notion of responsibility for responsible tourism has been laid bare - we all need to invest time and effort as a civic community to engage more meaningfully with stakeholders and take time to co-create solutions.

My own final reflection is that Edinburgh needs a responsible tourism "civic commission", established as a short-life collaborative project by civic partners across education, business, culture, community and council. This would explore some of these issues in a deep dive, provide a comprehensive understanding of the tourism ecosystem in Edinburgh, and to propose co-created solutions or consensual strategic approaches which can be implemented and evaluated with a longer-term collaborative civic tourism research programme. This would capitalise on existing expertise and knowledge management capabilities in our institutions, such as research excellence in tourism across all four city Universities, the city's data-driven innovation programme, and existing industry collaborations and strategic programmes. We need to ask a range of big questions about what is going on, who and what it affects, what are the consequences and unintended consequences of tourism, and what might work to sustain positive collaboration and outcomes for all. The responsibility I will personally take away having a foot in three camps - tourism, heritage and education, is to support such discussions further and encourage others to consider their responsibility to understand the complexities of the ecosystem. The conference has been an excellent launchpad for more enlightened collaboration, and I look forward to further Cockburn Association gatherings to unpack the thorny civic issues.

Responsible Tourism and Solutions for Edinburgh's Future:

The Cockburn Association's Position

Background
The genesis of this Cockburn mini conference was long-time in the making. Council reports in 2017 and 2018 highlighted increasing concerns with the city's Festival and Tourism products, citing increasing negativity towards them from local population. People's inability to get on with day-to-day life due to disruption during the peak visitor season was a common theme. The major public stushie around Underbelly's Christmas Market development in late 2019 illustrated the strange sense of entitlement that some tourism players seemed to think they had – the city was theirs to exploit. Nothing else mattered.

The Association's 2020 public summit – *City for Sale: the commodification of Edinburgh's civic spaces* – was a response to this. Over 800 people packed the Central Hall on Lothian Road on a Wednesday evening in January 2020 to hear a range of speakers, chaired by BBC Broadcaster Stephen Jardine, here issues and concerns with Festivalisation of the city. Then Covid hit. Conversations ended.

The Association continued to drive the debate and explore this theme during lockdown. Our Annual Lecture in 2020 was given by our then Chair, Professor Cliff Hague on the subject of "Whose Festival is it anyway?". It explored the drive for a growth, growth, growth strategy for tourism with a strategy created by the sector, for the sector, noting the 'echo chamber' of a small number of organisations who implemented the strategy. Under the same title, the Association then organised a day conference from leading players in the cultural sector exploring the concerns and challenges of the city's Festival and events-led tourism market. This showed the tensions within the cultural sector in the city, where the corporate expansion and development of the formal Festivals was mitigating against access by local players. Both are still available to watch on the Cockburn Association's YouTube channel.

Tourism impact – a global phenomenon
The Association noticed in our routine media oversight increasing concerns across Europe and beyond with "overtourism", and the negative consequences of too many visitors at any given time or location. The impact on housing related to the proliferation of short-term letting was frequently highlighted as a major issue. Indeed, the Cockburn Association organised the first Scottish conference on this subject in March 2018 – the conference report is still available on our website.

The UN World Tourism Organisation defines 'overtourism' as the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitor experiences in a negative way. It is often oversimplified as meaning too many tourists which is perhaps unhelpful. The World Economic Forum suggested that "it results from tourist demand exceeding the carrying capacity of host communities in a destination. Too often, the tourism supply chain stimulates demand, giving little thought to the capacity of destinations and the ripple effects on the well-being of local communities" (source – "What is overtourism and how can we overcome it", https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/10/what-is-overtourism-and-how-can-we-overcome-it).

Scotland, and Edinburgh, featured in this debate. CNN travel reported in 2019 Edinburgh being in the same category as cities like Barcelona, Venice, Amsterdam and Paris as places where overtourism is evident. As recently as 13 November 2024, Fodor's Travel Forum put the North Coast 500 onto their "No Go" list of global destinations not worth visiting. They reported, "the NC500 reportedly

contributed more than £22 million to the local economy in 2018 and added 180 full-time jobs. But this newfound surge in popularity comes with significant downsides, from the inconvenient to the downright disgusting." It said, "Overtourism is also driving up the cost of living in the Highlands, pricing out locals and steadily changing the region's culture. In a bid for self-preservation, the scenic peninsula of Applecross is said to be considering withdrawing from the official route." It's like Spanish towns asking to be taken off published bus timetables to reduce tourism pressures.

The Conference – setting out the framework

The parameters set by the Cockburn Association for all speakers and panellists was twofold: firstly, tourism is important for Edinburgh socially, culturally and economically; secondly, overtourism pressures in the city are real and need to be addressed.   In a bid to prevent the conference from turning into a short-term let rammy, we deliberately did not invite speakers on this subject. However, we did acknowledge the subject by inviting a social rents campaigning organisation to join a panel given the declared housing crisis in the city. We have no doubt that this subject will feature in ongoing debates.

The subject Responsible Tourism was deliberately chosen in that we wished to look forward to addressing some of the capacity issues in the city. However, we first needed to define it. Responsible Tourism was defined in Cape Town in 2002 alongside the World Summit on Sustainable Development. It is about "making better places for people to live in and better places for people to visit." A simple concept but a hugely challenging one to deliver.

Capacity management is a big issue in city. Professor John Lennon noted that there was evidence of significant tourism operations limiting numbers in order to preserve the site or protect the visitor experience. Disneyland was a global example where a finite and fixed number of visitors are permitted daily. Edinburgh Castle was a good local example, where Historic Environment Scotland had capped numbers at 9,000 this year, when pre-Covid, they would accept upwards of 16,000. Angela Giancola, a panellist in the first session and a guide at the castle highlighted the positive aspects of this, including increased staff well-being, improvements for the host community as well as improved visitor experience. There was no doubt that there was a trade-off in terms of reduced revenue. Professor Lennon compared this with some extractive industries such as hospitality companies and accommodation providers who prioritized profit and profit growth above all else. Whether they had an impact on the host community was not relevant to their business model.

In this post-Covid era, we must recognise that the pandemic erased a lot of the collective memory of the impacts of Overtourism. As the pandemic subsided, there was an expressed economic goal to return to the pre-Covid numbers. While there is a degree of legitimacy to this goal, the rush to return to "normal" meant that key issues were overlooked, and no time was left to pause and rethink our approaches to tourism management.

Moving closer to Responsible Tourism

It would be churlish not to accept the considerable efforts to make tourism and the events-led sector more responsible in its relationship with the host community of Edinburgh. Numerous speakers highlighted activity ranging from the Tourism Strategy 2030 suggesting the need to look through the eyes of the resident to the Forever Edinburgh programme of resident's awards and discounts. However, it was clear that very few of the assembled audience were aware of this.

A paradigm shift is required. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Dr Harold Goodwin of the Responsible Tourism Partnership captured it best. He noted that most accept the idiom that a great place to live is a great place to visit. However, the reverse does not follow - a great place to visit may not be a great place to live.   Therein lies the paradox – as more people visit a great place to live, the pressures on the host

community increases exponentially, affecting the residents and shifting the experiential impact as tourism moves into mass tourism mode. The tourist economy shifts to exploit this growth and can trigger a decline in the quality of life as more and more is given over to transient holiday makers at the perceived expense of the host community.

Responsible Tourism starts from the host community's perspective. Tourism in Edinburgh feels as if it has been focused mostly on the interests of the visitor. However, it is important to accept that the reasons why people love to live in Edinburgh are the same reasons why people wish to visit. The cultural offer, the historic townscape and heritage all within a small walkable city is a very compelling product. Edinburgh is probably closer to achieving a balance than might seem to be the case, but as the various contributors to the conference including the audience showed, there are some important barriers to be broached first.

Visitor Levy
A brief note is required on this. The Leader of the Council opened the conference talking about the opportunities that the "tourist tax" will present, a point echoed by others. This levy must be used for purposes that relate to place and the local tourism sector. The Edinburgh City Council launched a consultation on how income from the levy will be spent, which ran from September to December 2024. The potential revenue project is upwards of £400m over 10 years. How it is spent is key.

The proposals for investment from the visitor levy appear to address many of the key points raised at this conference, such as the city operations and infrastructure, cultural heritage and events, and destination and visitor management. The visitor levy offers a good opportunity for real change and improvements. For the Association, it is essential that this resource be used enhance the key qualities and amenities that make Edinburgh special, namely its historic townscape and its historic architectural heritage. It must also be seen to enhance the amenity of the city for its host communities. This will reinforce Edinburgh as a place to visit. After all, the top reason why tourists visit is to experience the unique characteristics of the city.   However, for a local authority that is significantly stretched financially, it is understandable that Edinburgh Council would wish to use some of this new money for core services. Edinburgh's proposal is to use around a third of this income for housing and housing-related activity (e.g. repair of empty Council houses). We empathise this. Edinburgh has a housing crisis, and we believe that the tourism sector has had a role to play in it, especially the untrammelled expansion of the short-term let industry and, to a greater or lesser degree, the expansion of the hotel sector. However, there may be other mechanisms to address this, such as the shift in planning policy requiring housing developments of a certain size to provide 35% of the total as affordable housing, an increase from the previous 25% requirement. This could take the form of actual houses or come as commuted payments in lieu of actual provision.

Sustainability and Climate
Sustainability and Climate were discussed throughout the conference, although not in detail. Edinburgh is uniquely positioned to effectively integrate its robust tourism economy with the sustainability objectives, climate change initiatives, and zero carbon targets established by both the Scottish Government and the City of Edinburgh Council. By implementing innovative strategies—such as promoting eco-friendly transportation, enhancing green infrastructure, and advancing sustainable tourism practices—the city can continue to attract visitors while concurrently minimizing its environmental impact.

This transition not only addresses pressing environmental concerns but also presents significant opportunities for economic development. The establishment of green jobs in renewable energy and sustainable tourism sectors can catalyse substantial economic growth. Furthermore, targeted investments in sustainable infrastructure are essential for bolstering the city's resilience to climate

change, thereby reinforcing Edinburgh's appeal as a destination for environmentally conscious travellers but also enhancing the city for its residents and workforce.

To optimize these opportunities, fostering collaboration among local businesses, government entities, and the community is imperative. By engaging in joint initiatives that protect the city's rich heritage and natural assets, stakeholders can collectively contribute to a sustainable future. Through these coordinated efforts, Edinburgh can serve as a model for other cities seeking to achieve a balanced approach to economic viability and environmental responsibility.

The Association's Key Asks

More engagement and communication with a wide set of stakeholders - Avoiding the Echo Chamber

A theme that ran through all presentations was the need for more engagement between the host communities and tourism/events sector. It is essential for operators to understand the issues and challenges for local residents and businesses. There is a huge opportunity to use local knowledge to both improve the management of visitors, appreciating the impacts – real and perceived – of their activities. Similarly, understanding visitor management and engagement can help equip local communities to better support and influence activities before they become a serious issue.
The Edinburgh Tourism strategy was written for the sector by the sector. Implementation and scrutiny groups tend to be confined those in the sector together with government agencies and the City Council. Whilst this may be necessary for operational aspects, it cannot be taken to be a representative voice or forum.

Using a wide range of existing networks and forums could help. The Edinburgh Civic Forum and Association of Edinburgh Community Councils should be used actively by tourism and festival organisations.

Setting the Limits for Acceptable Change

A key objective of the conference was to raise awareness of capacity management and the need to accept that Edinburgh can only absorb so many visitors at a given time. Instead of considering the ecological framework of 'carrying capacity', the concept of acceptable change was suggested. It is defined as a strategic planning framework that helps determine how much human-caused change is acceptable to a natural resource or destination. It is used to manage the impacts of human activities on the environment, such as recreation in wilderness areas or tourism in destinations.

The Association strongly advocates that this approach be adopted as the fundamental plank in a revised/enhanced tourism and events-led strategy. Critical to this will be the benchmarking of change and the extent to which is acceptable or not and by how much. The starting point for this is the perspective of the host community, not the visitor or the visitor industry. Throughout the conference, comments from the floor relayed a message that the host community in Edinburgh feels tourism as something which is done to them, as opposed to with them. Audience members expressed a feeling that there was a lack of interest from stakeholders in solving issues ranging from managing tourist numbers and sustainability to general city management of graffiti and litter.

Finally, in considering the limits of acceptable change, we must also consider the city's tourism product in the context of the global climate emergency and the political commitments to drive towards a net zero economy. Given that Edinburgh markets itself globally as a destination, we must accept that the carbon footprint created by visitors to the city is Edinburgh's responsibility, not the responsibility of the place of origin of the visitors.

Data and Data Management

A key discussion point throughout the conference was a need for reliable, action-oriented data collection. The sentiment that data for the sake of data is not worthwhile was repeated throughout the day; data should be collected with a focus on specific issues that need to be resolved. Also discussed was the reliability of data. For example, data on the number of STLs in the city vary dramatically depending on the source. There is a clear need to be critical of the sources of data within these conversations. A report on the number of STLs in a city commissioned by AirBnB, for example, may reflect the company's interests instead of reality.

If Edinburgh is to move towards a more responsible tourism approach and embed the concept of acceptable limits of change as a core management concept, then it must have good, coherent information to both understand those limits of change but to have a repeatable data set capable of measuring shifts in it.

Even basic information can be challenged to collect and collate. For example, one speaker suggested that 50% of tickets to the Festivals were bought by locals whereas another indicated that 70% were purchased in Scotland of which half were Edinburgh-based. Both were probably correct, which suggests that the data collected is variable and not on a like-for-like basis.

Data on crowd and crowd management could be crucial in understanding "pinch-points" in the city as well as gaining insight or additional insight into how visitors and participants move about the city. Modern technology enables much of this, such as the ability to track mobile phone 'pings' to get real-time information on movement space.

Just as the City Council publishes "Edinburgh by Numbers", we would advocate a unified data management unit to coordinate and oversee data collection, analysis and management. We understand that some work is already underway under ETAG's auspices, which is welcome, but this appears to be more a collation of other's information first and foremost.

Integration of tourism/events into the city.
There are several components to this. Firstly, there is a spatial and architectural component. Secondly, there is a community wealth-building component. Thirdly, there is a social and cultural component.

Spatially and architecturally, much work is needed to improve the current approach taken by the city and the sector in its place-making and place-management approaches. The continued use of 'heras' fencing, metal planters, massive vehicle barriers and the like gives the impression of "cheapness" and that crowd management is an afterthought. Dispersal is mentioned frequently in discussions but there is an inevitability that most visitors will want to experience the centre of the city due to its heritage and concentration of cultural attractions. Most people come to Edinburgh to experience these characteristics first and foremost, with visitor surveys consistently placing these attributes at the top of the reasons for visiting.

In the last VisitScotland survey, for example, 80% cited this as the top reason to come to Edinburgh/Scotland. In comparison, attending the Festivals came ninth at 14%. Dispersing events to permit a greater experience of the historic sections of the city might be one solution. Extending the pedestrian environment along the Royal Mile might be another. However, in all aspects, enabling the enjoyment of the heritage of the city should be the primary focus of visitor management.
In terms of community wealth-building, a key objective of the visitor economy must be an increase in economic value to the city and its business and residents. Blunt statements that, for example, the Winter Festivals are worth tens of millions to the local economy is meaningless if most of that money flows out of the city. Pop up hospitality facilities associated with events might form an important part

of the business model for event organisers, and we appreciate the need for commercial viability. However, the "cruise liner" approach where the objective is to reduce the spend outside the pay gate should be minimised. Thus, the purpose of the visitor economy should be a firm focus on retaining income in the city.

Enhancing the visitor experience should mesh seamlessly with the social and cultural fabric of the city. There is no doubt that the reasons that make Edinburgh such a popular place to live – its heritage, the Festivals and other cultural attractions, its walkability and its general ambiance – make it a popular place to visit. However, when out of balance, which we believe it now is, decisions seem to be made in the interest of the visitor and the tourism sector rather than the host community. Key to dealing with this conundrum is communication. Accepting capacity limits is also important, a point made several times.

Heritage and Place Enhancement as core tourism strategy objective

As noted several times in this statement, the main reason visitors are attracted to Edinburgh are to enjoy its scenery, its heritage, and its architectural and landscape qualities. It should be formal objective of tourism in the city to maintain and enhance these qualities. There are many examples where this has been achieved. For example, the repurposing of grand commercial buildings into hotels in places such as St Andrews Square such as the The Grand or Gleneagles Townhouse has conserved important listed buildings and added new hospitality spaces open to the public. Against this, there can be displaced opportunity for other needed uses including offices and residential, who may not have access to finance sources to compete in a speculative land economy.

Developments have eroded architectural or archaeological features in the city, which once lost are unretrievable. Proposals for new hotels in and around Princes Street might welcomely bring upper floors back into economic use but in doing so, fail to conserve original features that exist. This is especially the case where original Georgian buildings are involved. Overdevelopment can be a problem as developers seek to maximise the volume of building on a site, eroding the historic character of places and undermining key spatial elements in the First New Town, for example. And opportunities to restore buildings back into residential use are missed as the hospitality sector seeks to grow at the expense of all else.

The retention, preservation, enhancement, and interpretation of heritage assets should be a core objective of the tourism strategy, given the importance of these assets to the visitor economy. If the tourism sector is worth £2.5b to the Edinburgh economy annually, then the majority of this can be attributed to the historic townscape of Edinburgh.

An Action Agenda

A theme that surfaced occasionally but was consistent across the day was the need to deliver on things which had been discussed and agreed. This was particularly relevant in the management of civic spaces and streetscape issues, where unsightly and intrusive barriers continued to dominate the High Street and other core places despite repeated promises that things were being looked into. It would be wrong not to acknowledge a lot of positive work over the years, but there remained a strong feeling of inertia in key aspects of place management. Communication is key but widening the stakeholder collective is fundamental – what might not be an issue for the sector might be a significant problem for the local community, and vice versa.

Overtourism and the Housing Crisis

The current crisis affecting the city and overtourism are direct. However, it is not a simple binary issue. As a university city, there are significant pressures on student housing (see the Conference proceedings of our Student Housing Crisis event). Private rents have been increasing significantly

over the past decades. When rent controls were introduced, it had a stifling impact on the Buy to Rent sector. The expansion of the short-term let sector has been considerable and until relatively recently, there were no barriers to enter in the market and no controls over it. Whilst this has changed, there are considerable tensions, in both local communities and in the STL market. The conference noted that there was a considerable level of vacant property in the city as well, ranging from houses in transition (e.g. on sale), to those which have been empty for considerable periods of time, to Council stock in need of considerable investment to bring them back to tolerable standards.

Reports that the regulation of the STL market could cost the city upwards of £60m in tourist impacts were noted. At the same time, other reports have suggested that homes in residential use rather than STL use have a greater GVA effect on the city's economy.

Conclusion

This conference was a starting point for a wider conversation. The conference title asks is this the "solution for Edinburgh's future?". Perhaps this is overly simplistic. There is not one solution, nor one issue, nor one responsible party.

Almost all parties agree that the continued to shift to a responsible tourism model is desirably and necessary. This means a shift in emphasis and recognition that all players need to play a more collaborative role.

There is a requirement of the tourism industry to consider the host community first and foremost, and to actively engage outside of a sector echo-chamber. There is a responsibility of the tourists themselves to be conscious travellers and guests. There is a responsibility for the Government to establish and enforce concrete regulations and direct the revenue of levies where it rightfully belongs. There is a responsibility of the local community to engage where possible in these conversations and voice their concerns as well as suggest opportunities for management.

Should we all accept these responsibilities, this city that is a good place to visit will remain a good place to live.

Appendix

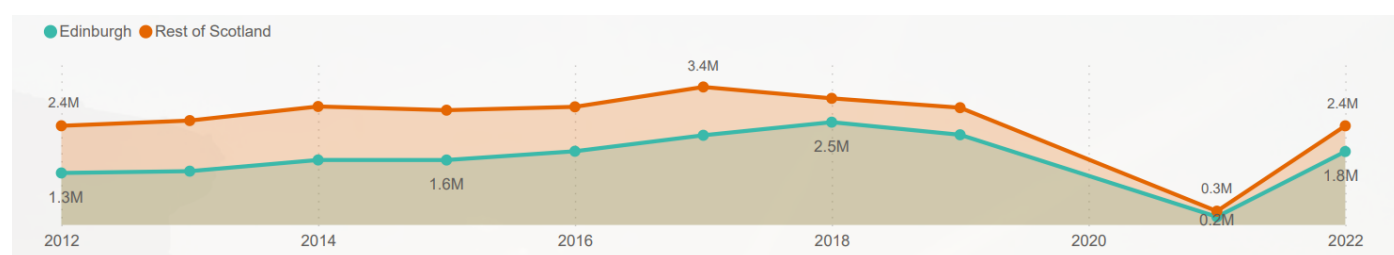Data from Edinburgh Council's 2023 "Edinburgh by Numbers" report.

Figure 1: Number of staying visits in Edinburgh and the rest of Scotland from 2012 to 2022 ("Edinburgh by Numbers" City of Edinburgh Council).
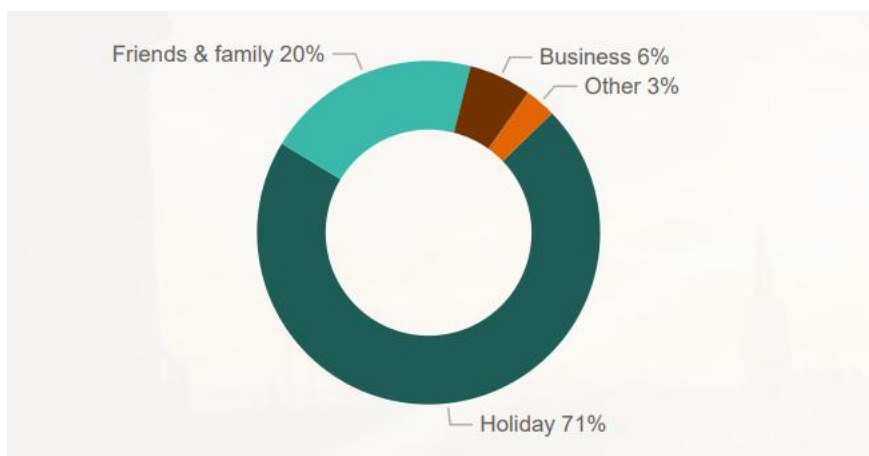
Figure 2: Percentage of Staying Visits in Edinburgh by Purpose ("Edinburgh by Numbers" City of Edinburgh Council).
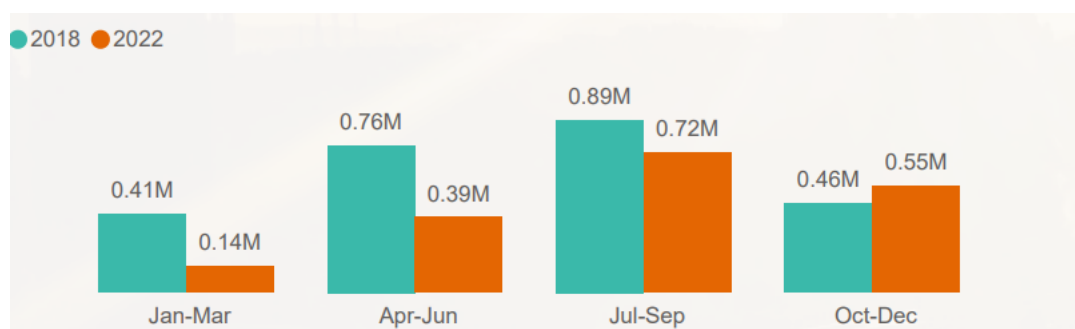

Figure 3: Number of Visitors to Edinburgh by season 2018-2022 ("Edinburgh by Numbers" City of Edinburgh Council).

Biographies

Conference Chair

Professor Ian Baxter originally trained as an archaeologist at the University of Edinburgh and completed a PhD at the University of Cambridge investigating strategic management within heritage and conservation organisations. He has worked for various universities north and south of the border (mainly within business schools) and continues to work with a number of different heritage sector organisations undertaking consultancy, research, governance and operational roles. He is currently Professor of Historic Environment at Heriot-Watt University where he teaches tourism and heritage management.

Speakers

Dr Harold Goodwin

Harold Goodwin was, until recently, chair of the Faversham Society; he is now Vice Chair. He has worked on 4 continents with local communities, their governments and the inbound and outbound tourism industry. He is the Founder of the ICRT. global, which umbrellas the ICRTs around the world to share knowledge and skills. He is a Professor Emeritus and a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University. He is Managing Director of the Responsible Tourism Partnership and adviser to WTM Africa on its Responsible Tourism programme. He drafted the Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism and the 2022 Charter on Responsible Tourism. Much of his recent work has been on overtourism. He chairs the panels of judges for the Global Responsible Tourism Awards and the other regional awards in the family in Africa, India, Latin America, South East Asia, and the Rest of the World.

Caroline Warburton

Caroline Warburton is VisitScotland's Destination Development Director for the Central and North East region. The region spans from Ayrshire and Arran in the West, through the Central Belt and to Moray, Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. She manages a team who oversee VisitScotland's strategic engagement and partnership activities across the region. Caroline also has direct responsibility for Fife, Perthshire, Dundee and Angus and represents VisitScotland on a number of national issues including Scotland's Towns Partnership and outdoor tourism. Caroline joined VisitScotland in April 2018 from the Scottish Tourism Alliance (STA) where she was responsible for coordinating Scotland's first industry-led national tourism strategy, Tourism Scotland 2020. Prior to the STA, Caroline spent 10 years establishing and running Wild Scotland, Scotland's wildlife and adventure tourism association which brought the sector together, developed the industry's first responsible wildlife watching guidelines and established Scotland's national and international profile as a wildlife-watching and adventure destination.

Professor J John Lennon

Prof J John Lennon is the Principal and Found of JJ Lennon Tourism Development Consultancy Ltd. John has established business development in travel, tourism and hospitalist working internationally and domestically with the private and public sectors. John is currently leading on projects involving UK City development and marketing, development of tourism levy collection and investment, destination marketing, heritage development and interpretation, and more. John also holds visiting faculty positions at the University of Applied Sciences, Krems, Austria and the University of Limerick, Ireland. John was the Founding Director of Moffat Centre and Moffat Professor in Travel and Tourism Business Development, Glasgow Caledonian University 2000-2024.The Moffat Centre is UK's most successful University based Tourism and Travel consultancy and research centre, which has undertaken on more than 750 projects in over 40 countries. This business development and contract research centre competes with commercial agencies at a national and international level.

Donald Emslie

Donald became Chair of ETAG at the beginning of 2020. Since then, through ETAG Donald has been working to support the city's visitor economy. Donald is well known in Edinburgh from his previous role as Chair of The Royal Lyceum Theatre and Royal Zoological Society of Scotland and as a NED at Scottish Rugby. He also served two terms as a Non-Executive Director of Scottish Water, the public water utility for Scotland. He is currently the Chair and owner of Thorpe Hall Leisure Ltd which owns the Lifehouse Spa & Hotel near Frinton on Sea and CHMC Ltd, a consultancy involved in the hospitality sector. Donald is committed to advancing the delivery of the Edinburgh Tourism 2030 Strategy and its key areas of focus: People, Planet and Place. Donald is a firm believer that the tourism industry has a positive role to play in creating economic, social and cultural benefits for everyone in Edinburgh.

Dr Julian Grant

Dr Julian Grant lives in Leith and recently completed a PhD in history with the University of the Highlands & Islands. His doctoral research explored the relationship between local communities and tourism around the North Coast 500 touring route. Rooted in the experiences and perspectives of residents, this study framed grassroots practices of heritage as a way of living with the complex impacts — positive and negative — of mass tourism. Julian currently works as a freelance heritage interpreter and serves on the board of the Scottish Community Heritage Alliance. He is passionate about developing community-driven approaches to tackling critical issues at the intersection of culture, economy and society.

Dr Louise Todd

Dr Louise Todd is an Associate Professor and interim Head of the Tourism and Intercultural Business Communications Subject Group at Edinburgh Napier University. Louise is Deputy Lead of the Tourism Research Centre, leads the Visual Methods and Ethnography Research Group, and leads on Public Engagement with research in ENU's Business School. Louise's research interests are in arts, cultural tourism and public engagement. She is concerned with visual culture, creative and visual research methods alongside the potential of festivals and tourism to engage with community stakeholders. Louise's background is in visual art. Her practice

and research interests are complementary. She has published her research in academic journals, presented at conferences and exhibited her artwork on an international basis.

Panellists

Angela Giancola

Angela Giancola is a Guide at Edinburgh Castle. She has ten years of extensive experience working in the Scottish heritage tourism sector. She recently completed a year-long secondment as Sustainability Officer in the Climate Change team at Historic Environment Scotland (HES), collaborating with colleagues to implement the organization's *Climate Action Plan (CAP) 2020-2025*, which includes Sustainable Tourism among its objectives. In 2023, she obtained a master's degree in Cultural Heritage Management with Tourism from Heriot-Watt University. Her dissertation examined the implications for HES in transitioning to Responsible Tourism, coinciding with the organization's publication of its *Responsible Tourism Framework*. Using Doune Castle and "Rediscovering the Antonine Wall" as examples of HES's Responsible Tourism projects, her research investigates what the organization has accomplished regarding sustainable and responsible tourism and offers suggestions for addressing current challenges. Angela is passionate about heritage and community engagement and is a member of Community Connections, HES's comprehensive approach to collaborating with local communities as well as the heritage and tourism sectors.

Patrick Keady

Patrick relocated to the Old Town of Edinburgh, in 2015. He is one of the few licensed homesharers operating there today, supervising guests in his home, where he lives. Patrick joins them for breakfast and discusses their perspectives on how Edinburgh is working for them. They have much in common with what residents say to Patrick, in his role as a Community Councillor. He is a former chair of the Bord of Trustees at IOSH, a chartered professional body, with 48,000 members, living in 105 countries around the World; a non-executive director at IRM, the professional membership body for enterprise risk management; deputy editor of the peer-reviewed Perspectives in Public Health; and Director in the NHS, in England. Patrick holds masters degrees in literature and business. He is a retired Fellow of the Royal Societies of the Arts, Chemistry, Medicine and Public Health.

Elin Williamson

With a dynamic career spanning strategic business leadership and economic development, Elin Williamson is a visionary professional spearheading transformative initiatives in Edinburgh's economic landscape. As the Head of Business Growth and Inclusion, she leads on the Council's economic development activities, championing a sustainable and inclusive economy. Notably, Elin played a central role in shaping the city's economic recovery post-COVID, specifically supporting local businesses and vulnerable communities and has, for the last two years, been the Council's Senior Responsible Officer for the development of a Visitor Levy for Edinburgh. Elin's expertise extends to collaborative partnerships across sectors and regions, and she was actively involved in the development of the Regional Prosperity Framework for Edinburgh and South East Scotland, aiming to propel large-scale projects for regional economic advancement, as well as in the development of the Forth Green Freeport, a private/public partnership to drive regeneration and ensure a just transition along the Firth of Forth.

Meg Bishop

Meg is part of the organising team for Living Rent, Scotland's Tenants Union, a democratic union run by and for tenants with the aim to tackle the power imbalances currently faced in in the housing sector. The bulk of their work involves member defence, supporting one another through disputes with landlords and letting agents. Meg is mainly involved in the campaigns regarding holiday lets and rent controls. With Living Rent, Meg works to organise meetings; give talks and presentations; compile press releases and policy reports; as well as campaign 'on the ground'.

Conference Recording

Recordings of the conference are available on our YouTube Channel.

Session One: https://youtu.be/nGFkO79StFU?si=TNkGnnFFtPsfUNu7

Session Two: https://youtu.be/cx8kSTXdY6w?si=8V4EY9JVqmXHGTUV