



Imagine Portobello 30th May 2015 Draft Report

This draft report summarises key points from the Imagine Portobello event held on 30 May 2015. We are asking for any additions or alterations to the subjects and opinions expressed in the report as a record of the day.

New ideas or proposals for practical developments are welcome and should be brought to a follow up session on Monday 19th October, 7.30 at St. Mark's Church, where we will discuss ways forward.

1 Background

This event was the work of many hands and reflected the perspectives and concerns of different groups in the community. It was all made possible by the Portobello and Craigmillar Neighbourhood Partnership who awarded Big Things on the Beach a grant of £1500 to hold a celebration of ten years of public art activities in Portobello, with a brief to include other cultural organisations, their achievements and future developments. The local Scotmid Co-operative community programme also contributed.

In order to make the event as attractive to as wide a spectrum of the Portobello community as possible and also to stimulate 'outward' rather than 'inward' facing thinking, we decided to invite a number of prominent contributors with roles or perspectives that could provoke and broaden thinking on the day. Local musicians and poets also contributed to the vibrancy of the day and provided a finale.

2 Overall conclusions from the day

- There was an immediate and longer-term need for indoor and outdoor space for public and community use.
- There was a requirement for better cooperation between the Council, its departments and the Community in, the access to, and development of, community resources.

- The Pipe St Toilet block with surrounding land and decommissioned church halls would have a great deal of potential for community development and use.

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- The construction of a contemporary Pier would be a welcome development, would meet a number of land and water based community needs and could contribute to the wider economic development of Portobello?
- Continued need for cooperation to support existing groups and activities.
- There was a question of some community infrastructure to develop the relationship between artists, art and community.
- There is a need to strengthen the identity of Portobello both as a destination and a place to live. That identity to be both part of and separate from Edinburgh as a whole.
- That developments/resources are inclusive and affordable.

Indoor Space

- It was suggested that the former church and halls in Bellfield Street might meet some of the needs identified in the discussions. 'International and local, 'Maison de la Culture', take politicians to France to see.'
- 'Exhibition space – crowd fund to buy church/hall. Out of the Blue example.'
- 'Need more inclusive and friendly physical meeting spaces.'
- 'More community ownership – SPACES held within community.'
- 'Town Hall. Make it more accessible and affordable for community.'
- 'Central space to hold ceilidh gatherings.'
- 'Make use of church buildings/halls for artistic community use.'
- New community school facilities – what will they be?
- 'Using facilities and spaces. Council and Church putting peoples' needs over short term income.'

Outdoor Space

Most comment referred to the importance of the Beach and Promenade as major, democratic and potentially unifying features of Portobello.

- 'THE BEACH!'
- 'Beach and seaside destination.'
- 'Under developed Beach/Prom.'
- 'Sea-bound; space for wildness; landscape – tracing it, learning it.'
- 'Selling the beach as a venue.'
- 'Peace. Relaxation.'
- 'Accessibility – Portobello is potentially very wheelchair accessible, because of the prom, SO, make the beach accessible, everything

ramped where possible and a changing place/toilet and beach wheelchair.’

- ‘Beach huts – space for.’
- ‘Swimming Harbour.’
- ‘Development of the Prom to have value to the community.’
- ‘More community control over the Prom’s future.’

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Reference was also made to the three proposals developed and promoted in recent years by Big Things on the Beach.

‘Re-Apier’ – a radical re-thinking of the concept of a pier developed in 2006 by a group of local residents with appropriate professional skills. A bid for major lottery funding was made but unsuccessful.

This idea was revived for this event with a conceptual design discussed as part of the Cultural Mapping element of the day. Following the event, the idea of a new pier for Portobello was taken up in a significant way by the local media.

‘A Public Art Strategy for Portobello Promenade’, developed in 2010 with funding from the Scottish Arts Council and the City of Edinburgh Council with major public consultation. The initiative also supported three significant temporary public art commissions. This strategy was shelved by the City Council in the context of the financial crisis of the time but was revived as a ‘Manifesto for Portobello Promenade’ in the context of the local government elections in 2012. This led to a series of ongoing meetings with Council officials.

Pipe Street Toilet Block – potential tourist information hub/heritage centre etc. This building and the apron of land in front of it were recently considered for redundancy as part of a Council review of toilet provision in Edinburgh. The building has been retained for service but is open for only part of the year.

Big Things on the Beach, along with the Portobello Heritage Trust, developed a proposal in 2014 submitted to the Scottish Government’s Coastal Regeneration Fund. The proposal was to redesign and extend, as a semi-permanent development, a local arts/cultural hub, an interpretation centre for the adjacent kilns and a tourist information centre. Several toilets would be retained and made available year round. Big Things on the Beach is currently seeking resources for a feasibility study of the proposal.

The High Street. There was also reference to the High Street, ‘less and better designed street furniture’ and to the need for local traders to be involved in any programme of cultural development. In addition reference was made to the need for more pedestrian areas and cycle friendly streets.

3 Moving Forward

Whilst there was no discussion of priorities between any of the ideas proposed, the following generic points were made which will need to be considered in developing any future strategy:

- 'Organic change. Nothing unified. Diversification.'
- 'Connected thinking.'
- 'A sense of focus.'
- 'We do it ourselves.'
- 'Enthusiasm – individual leadership inspiring community.'
- 'Don't wait for others to decide, we do it ourselves.'
- 'Speak to Voluntary Arts Scotland. Speak to Volunteer Scotland.'
- 'Need to have information on how to access inclusive growth - from Scottish Government, Councillors, local economic blueprint.'

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Participants identified a number of challenges if any of this is to be achieved:

- 'How do we generate confidence to take things forward?'
- 'Communication – how do we keep people informed and engaged in what is happening? Could the Community Council be a channel for this?'
- 'People – the challenge of diversity, different views and conflicts in relationships.'
- 'Bureaucracy.'
- 'Local empowerment.'
- 'Funding.'
- 'Organisation – is any additional community organisation required? Is any existing organisation appropriate and in a position to provide a structural framework for going forward, or is something additional required. A Community Development Trust? Creative Portobello?'

Resources and Facilities

Funding was identified as a major factor but little time was spent discussing any details of how further funding for any activity might be secured. The main items of discussion were concerned with the problems of securing indoor space for community use and/or cultural developments and with the outdoor environments of the High Street and the Beach.

4 Event design and publicity

From November 2014 onwards, Big Things on the Beach arranged a number of planning meetings for an event, involving representatives of other cultural groups. Additional community members became involved at a later stage as facilitators for discussions on the day and as chairs for specific sessions.

In addition to the programmed activities, the event also included a display of materials recording the public art commissions and other activities organised by Big Things on the Beach during the last ten years, some historical material from local history archives and stalls from the Portobello Heritage Trust and PEDAL. Substantial efforts were made to make the venue as attractive and effective as possible for the day. A PA system was hired for the event, together with additional PA and projection equipment loaned from local organisations and individuals.

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Publicity: Every effort was made to inform the local community of the event: An 'Imagine Portobello' Facebook page was created linked to the website and Twitter account of Big Things on the Beach. Online social networking was active on the day and subsequently, conveying a positive account of the event. 100 Posters were designed and printed and were placed in a number of public places in Portobello and Craigmillar 5000 'postcard' invitations were designed and printed and provided to local libraries other public places. Volunteers also delivered these to most households in Portobello.

A Press Release was issued to numerous media outlets in Edinburgh. The Edinburgh Evening News published a substantial article in advance of the event and also carried a 'Platform' piece by Damian Killeen on the issues involved. The Evening News and STV Edinburgh also published material following the event. Lesley Riddoch included her reflections on the event in her podcast <http://www.lesleyriddoch.com/the-lesley-riddoch-podcast/> (at 32 minutes).

The venue. The event was held in the former Old Parish Church and Church Halls in Bellfield Street, Portobello which met accessibility standards. This building has been declared redundant to the requirements of the Church of Scotland and its future is, as yet, undecided. The venue was selected, in part, as a means of bringing the building and its potential as a community asset to the attention of the wider community. Volunteers from the church community provided a lunchtime café.

Admission was free, with a voluntary donation box. The event was attended by 170 members of the public, some attending specific sessions, some staying for the whole day (10.30 – 17.30) With good weather outside and other attractions in the area, *approximately half* of those attending were still present for the final session of the day. There was no advance booking system, so numbers and the interests of those attending were not known in advance. This enabled people to make last minute decisions to attend or not, depending on other factors and also enabled participants to come and go throughout the day to attend to children or other caring needs.

5 The programme

The programme consisted of a combination of illustrated presentations, panel discussions and facilitated, participatory, round table discussions. There was also a participatory, cultural mapping exercise which participants engaged with throughout the day, describing activities already under way in the community and identifying new possibilities. Local musicians introduced the morning and afternoon sessions and, together with performance poets, provided a musical finale to the day in the Bellfield church building. Lunch was available to be purchased from the café on the premises and afternoon tea was served gratis to all participants.

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6 Speaker Contributions

Presentations:

Lesley Riddoch,	Author and broadcaster.
Andrew Dixon,	Director of Creativity Culture and Place
Damian Killeen,	Chair, Big Things on The Beach
Sophia Marriage,	Rector of St Mark's Episcopal Church

Invited participants:

Cllr. Maureen Child,	Portobello and Craigmillar Neighbourhood Partnership
Janet Archer,	Chief Executive, Creative Scotland
Cllr. Richard Leslie,	Chair Culture and Leisure Committee, City of Edinburgh Council.

We also invited local musicians and poets to perform during the event and to provide a Musical Finale.

Contributions and Responses

Damian Killeen, Chair of Big Things on the Beach introduced the day by noting that responses to pre-publicity for the event had ranged from '*there is no culture in Portobello*' to '*the arts are alive and kicking in Portobello*'. He suggested that the truth might lie somewhere in between and that the purpose of the day was to explore this area. The day was not intended to promote any specific agenda but to enable a conversation in the community and to see where it led.

Lesley Riddoch opened the day with a strong argument for increased and better informed local decision making on all matters of interest to communities, comparing local government structures in Scotland with those in continental Europe where much smaller units of local government apply. In most Nordic countries, she argued, local structures already exist for developing the kinds of issues under consideration at the 'Imagine Portobello' event. She also argued that questions about what culture consists of should

be a matter for local discussion and not just for top down determination. Fundamental to Lesley's concerns was the issue of the ownership of local assets especially, though not exclusively, land, as the basis for communities to develop cultural identity and economic and political power.

This contribution prompted discussion about the nature of Portobello's community/communities and concern that discussions about culture in the area are limited to a group with particular interests, rather than to the wider community.

Lesley Riddoch spoke about the particular 'Britishness' of Edinburgh and, possibly, Portobello – demonstrated in architecture and street names as much as in other ways - and the difficulties of communications between people with a particularly British way of conceiving and expressing their ideas and people

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who are more rooted in Scottish culture. Combined with social class and economic status, these differences require a nuanced approach to discussion of matters of identity, belonging and community.

Lesley Riddoch was challenged on her assertion that Scotland's national cultural institutions do not do sufficient to celebrate the cultural achievements of Scots but defended her claim that George Wiley, Sorley McLean and others are under represented in the presentation of Scotland's cultural life.

There was also discussion about the relationship between art produced by the community and art commissioned by the community, the role of artists in relation to these different forms of cultural engagement and the possible need for different kinds of community infrastructure to support their development. In relation to the pyramids project 'Wonder' by Hill Jephson Robb , for example, the substantial role played by the community in constructing and destructing the art work was valued; but it was also noted that it required an artist to conceive, plan and supervise the activity and an organisation to raise funds, make the commission, employ the artist, deal with permissions etc.

Andrew Dixon – Director of Culture, Creativity and Place Ltd.

Andrew Dixon presented a series of images of culturally led regeneration that illustrated the need and value of development processes that invest in the exploration of the unique and valued characteristics of a community and which build on this to tell a 'story' which will be effective in marketing an area and attracting inward investment as well as being inspirational to artists and others involved in the creative process. He also pointed to the need for courage on the part of civic leaders and others to deal with the understandable concerns and anxieties of community members faced with the prospect of change. He recounted that in the early days of the development of the Angel of the North concern was expressed that the structure would interfere with the flight patterns of aircraft and threaten local wildlife etc. whereas, now, it is an established icon of the North East of England.

Referring to the issue of who was and who was not participating in discussions about cultural development Andrew described a practice of asking current participants to bring with them to future events at least one person, e.g. aged between 20 and 30, who might not otherwise have come along.

Janet Archer, Chief Executive, Creative Scotland, expressed strong support for community arts initiatives and offered to following up any forthcoming proposals of relevance to the remit of Creative Scotland.

Cllr. Richard Leslie, Chair Culture and Leisure Committee, City of Edinburgh Council, expressed the commitment of the Council to supporting and encouraging cultural developments across the city and not just at it's centre, making a connection between our aspirations and recent policy and

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strategy reports which support and develop the cultural sector, including 'Thundering Hooves' and 'Desire Lines'.

Cllr Maureen Child welcomed the event and highlighted positive developments in the area, giving her encouragement for initiatives which enhance the community both for residents and visitors.

Sophia Marriage, Rector of St Mark's Episcopal Church, chaired a session in which several representatives of cultural groups in Portobello described their activities and aspirations and the obstacles they face. These were: Portobello Book Festival, Portobello Open Door (POD), Heritage Trust, Portobello Youth Theatre, Big Things on the Beach. In addition to the session being informative for many participants who were unaware of several initiatives within the community, a number of common themes emerged from these presentations.

- A shortage of spaces for a wide range of community activities or for the development and presentation of cultural works of all kinds. Concern was expressed about the closure of two church halls in the area and about the cost and unsuitability of the Town Hall as a venue. Appreciation was expressed to the providers of existing spaces but there was agreement that more dedicated spaces are required.
- The City Council, in its constant search for income, was seen as an obstacle to certain community activities, especially those outdoors, rather than as a facilitator. Problems were experienced in dealing with accessing electricity and dealing with refuse disposal and toilet facilities. The Council was also perceived to be unhelpful in relation to a number of heritage issues, raising legal issues rather than facilitating the community's intentions. At the same time, it was positively acknowledged that a range of local services, especially the public library, play a significant role in supporting community initiatives.

- Recruitment of volunteers was raised as an issue by several groups. This was related to the changing demography of the area, with an ageing population of active citizens being followed by a generation of young professionals with young families and with little time to contribute to community activities.
- Funding. For those whose activities were funding dependent, greater difficulty in accessing resources is putting pressure on their ability to deliver, diverting energies and undermining morale.

Despite these difficulties the organisations represented and others in the community continue with their activities, within their capacities, as a contribution to community cohesion and development.

7 Group Discussions

Participants broke into 10 facilitated discussion groups to address the same three questions:

- *What does culture in Portobello mean to you?*
- *How would we like Portobello to be culturally?*
- *What are the opportunities and challenges for achieving this?*

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Responses were summarised on post-it notes, put on to flip chart sheets and exhibited on the walls of the venue.

The questions were framed to be inclusive of a wide range of possible participants and this was reflected in the ways that groups responded. As one participant noted, *'There is a difference between culture and the arts'* and it was clear that some participants were addressing the nature and culture of Portobello as a community, others were focusing more on the role of arts and artistic practice in Portobello as a cultural location.

This was not a consensus event and many points made were contrasting or contradictory of each other. However, some common themes emerge from the feedback. These are reported here as issues for further exploration along with any clearly controversial or dissenting points.

What does culture in Portobello mean to you?

Participants' comments capture a sense of a community at a point of change and exhibiting tensions related to that change:

'A cluster of communities that do not overlap'
 'Getting posher'
 'Gentrification'
 'Diverse'
 'Conflicted'
 'Social class and money'

'Rich'
'Staid'
'Isolated and contained.'
'Hidden communities'
'Commuter ebb and tide'
'Evolving'
'Integrating long term dwellers and new arrivals'.
'Lacking infrastructure'
'Some people are more active than others.'
'A mixture of locals and visitors'

Participants also described Portobello's community as:

'Vibrant'
Dynamic'
'Can – do'
'Self-organising'
'The most progressive community in Edinburgh I know'
'Family oriented'

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'Child friendly'
'Arty'
'Local involvement – shoulder to the wheel.'
'Connected beyond Portobello.'
'Vibrant music scene.'
'Village'
'Human'
'Café culture'
'Special'
'Rebellious'
'Varied, engaging, possibly smug, challenging.'

A strong feature of these discussions was a sense of 'potential',

- 'Unfulfilled potential'
- 'Potential to be explored'.
- 'The potential of this town has not yet been fulfilled.'
- 'Pretty vibrant. Potential for more. Could be San Francisco?'

There was also a theme of Portobello's relationship to Edinburgh:

- 'Portobello needs to be seen as different from Edinburgh'.
- 'Don't want to lose control/power to Edinburgh'.
- 'Getting power over planning.'
- 'We need our share out of the taxes we pay.'
- 'Network with other smaller communities rather than looking to Edinburgh.'

And some wider political points:

- 'Rights for common land/ Community Empowerment Bill/ mapping of all assets/ protect common land and community spaces.'
- 'New developments need to take community into consideration.'
- 'More control of major decisions over the environment.'

The question emerging from this discussion was, '*What kind of community is Portobello becoming; is it possible for any shared understanding of the community to be achieved and how might a shared identity be arrived at?*'

Portobello as a 'cultural' location.

Participants identified a variety of current and planned cultural initiatives. These have been incorporated into the Cultural Mapping exercise undertaken at the event.

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Participants approached this issue from three different perspectives:

- As people who were concerned to foster grassroots cultural developments.
- As professional artists or 'creatives' living in Portobello.
- As people who are interested to develop a cultural offer in Portobello that is also attractive to cultural tourists etc.

These perspectives are not mutually exclusive but it was not possible to fully explore their interrelationship on the day.

- '*Portobello – a place for artists or a place for participation?*'

Grassroots concerns:

- 'Be inclusive – engage more people.'
- 'Build on what we've got.'
- 'Participatory arts.'
- 'A lot has already been achieved.'
- 'Spread activity around different community locations'.
- 'Go to where people are'.
- 'Connect up diverse groupings/resources/venues.'
- 'Involve children/teenagers/schools.'
- 'Intergenerational work/older people/dementia friendly Party.'
- 'What does culture mean for children?'
- 'Open space for democratic expression and discussion.'

- 'World café/open space. Approaches to community led development/planning.'
- 'More public space devoted to edible growing for community feasts.'
- 'More Community Garden project days – education and communication'.
- 'Encouraging, inclusive grass roots activities off the ground.'
- 'Local people having time to participate.'
- 'How can we get more people involved – more power?'
- 'A place for sharing stories.'
- 'Falkirk Community Charter – planning decisions assessed against the Charter.'
- 'Involving children in imagining and planning community charter.'
- 'Education and involvement of all sections of society/community. Ask what long established residents want re: culture/events.'
- 'Lots of folk I know can't afford the £4/5.00 entrance fees to things after benefits cuts.'
- 'So things need subsidized – the £10/5.00 price bands exclude many.'
- 'Magdalenes?'
- 'Language!!!!'

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Professional artists and 'creatives':

- 'More connections between people working locally – open studio days.' (Artwalk Party is currently exploring the feasibility of this kind of thing).
- 'Art in affordable cafes.'
- 'Exposure of arts.'
- 'More places for artists to create.'

Although not specifically referred to by participants, these points and others made by artists at the event were consistent with the 'Desire Lines' report based on consultation with artists and arts bodies across Edinburgh and submitted to the Culture and Leisure Committee in June 2015.

Portobello as a cultural location:

- 'Art addressing big issues.'
- 'Not enough of a destination culturally as it could/should be.'
- 'Future developments should have a stronger art input.'
- 'Destination to be talked about.'

There were also suggestions of a 'Festival of Portobello' and of artists' residencies in the area, possibly attached to one or more of the active cultural groups in Portobello.

A final report will reflect the outcome of the follow-up meeting to be held on 19 October, 7.30 at St Mark's Church.

With many thanks to all those who participated on the day, sharing their ideas and ideals to enhance Portobello for residents, visitors and for a thriving local economy and special thanks to our performers: the Portobello Community Choir, Fun Fiddlers – junior and senior, the Guitar Ensemble, Portobello Music School, soloists Rosie Nimmo and Eileen Penman, poets Emily Elver, Rachel Amey, an Max Scratchmann, who was also our MC for the grand finale. We are also grateful to Danielle Trudeau for designing our attractive posters and postcards.

Damian Killeen, Chairperson
Big Things on the Beach
September 2015
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