



# Edinburgh Old Town Association

## Convener's Report 2019

So many of the issues that have bedevilled the Old Town area remain problematic and unresolved despite the best endeavours of the Old Town Association and other organisations. Issues include short-term holiday lets, student housing, traffic and public transport, over-tourism, planning enforcement, silent discos, buskers, unlicensed walking groups and bicycle tours, disruption for filming and social concerns like homelessness and begging. In 2019 added to these problems was the introduction of 'events' involved in CEC initiatives – namely Open Streets and Summertime Streets. Open Streets was introduced in the Convener's Report for 2018. There was a well-attended consultation meeting in March 2019 with members of the Old Town Association Committee present. The inaugural Open Streets event was on 5th May when Edinburgh became the first UK city to join the Open Streets movement.

Many streets in the Old Town area were closed to traffic on the first Sunday of the month 'to help to increase public exploration, use and awareness of the connected areas in the old town'. After the first closure the OTA pointed out the need for improved communication on a number of levels – not all Old Town residents had received the explanatory leaflet produced by Open Streets, no mention was made in the leaflet of the re-routing of the 35 bus and the signs at the foot of the Canongate, the High Street and other access routes baldly stated ROAD CLOSED with no indication as to why. Since the first months there has been more positive feedback with comments and emails to the Open Streets initiative to indicate that the streets felt pleasant on an Open Streets day, more pedestrians were involved, and a wider range of available activities: all well received.

The Summertime Streets operation in August during the Festival was more controversial. All the affected streets were in the Old Town. Road closures, relocating bus stops and taxi ranks, suspending parking places and altering the timing of traffic lights were all involved. Councillors had agreed with these plans to 'ensure the safe movement of both residents and visitors to the city during the peak summer season'. Feedback was invited after the experiment and in the August 2019 edition of the OTA newsletter hard-hitting views were expressed in the article 'Has the Council lost the Plot?' Concerns were passed on to the OTA about the month-long re-routing of the 35 bus – a lifeline for those who live in the Canongate. Not everyone is young, fit and mobile and there was the feeling that the needs of the residents, the elderly and those with mobility issues were being ignored. Indeed, it seemed discriminatory that tourist buses were able to access the Canongate but not the 35. Lip service is paid to the need for proper consultation and information but in the Summer Streets initiative there is definite room for improvement.

As far as other issues are concerned short-term holiday remains a great worry. Rosemary Mann from the Old Town Association Committee has been interviewed by both the BBC and STV on the topic. A hopeful sign is that the Scottish Government is due to introduce legislation in early 2021 that will better regulate the sector to everyone's benefit. It is possibly encouraging too that AirBnB has pledged 'it will make a positive contribution to society'. Over the year we have addressed a number of members' concerns and we are grateful for the help and support we have had from our local Councillors, in particular Joanna Mowat.

Members of the OTA Committee have managed to collect from a wide range of newspapers numerous articles relating to the Old Town covering topics like holiday lets, over-tourism, disruption for filming and silent discos. Many of the articles at the end of 2019 referred in unflattering terms to Edinburgh's Christmas and Hogmanay. A feature in the Times written by Magnus Linklater was headlined EDINBURGH IS BECOMING A TARTAN DISNEYLAND. Anja Amsel, Honorary President of the Old Town Association, responded in support of his remarks. There is no doubt that the Christmas and Hogmanay events were contentious and it is time to reflect that a Capital City and a World Heritage site like Edinburgh deserves a more appropriate celebration.

As always the Old Town Association has maintained links with many other agencies including the City of Edinburgh Council, the Old Town Community Council, the Cockburn Association, Edinburgh World Heritage, the Central Library, the National Library, the Civic Forum, the Museum of Childhood, the Fringe Society and Police Scotland. Members of the Committee attended meetings on the City Plan 2030, a City Centre Neighbourhood Network meeting, a Community Engagement Evening organised by the Fringe Society and the Scottish Civic Trust Conference. Students in Urban Planning at Newcastle University were helped in their dissertation research by members of the Committee

We welcomed the opening of The Crannie at the foot of Cranston Street which is an important community resource. It is a welcoming and impressive space and will be well used for classes, meetings and social events. Members of the OTA were able to attend the opening party.

There are currently 11 members on the Committee of the Old Town Association. They are: Anja Amsel (Honorary President), Barbara Logue (Convener), Naomi Richardson (Vice-Convener and Events Secretary), Jean Fairbairn (Minutes Secretary), Rosemary Mann (Treasurer and Membership Secretary), Bill Cowan (Planning Secretary). Eric Drake (Newsletter Editor), Laura Harrington, Katie Kerr, Kate Marshall and Tim Williams. Bill Cowan as Planning Secretary deals with the many and diverse planning applications relating to the Old Town area presented to the City of Edinburgh Council, Eric Drake as Newsletter Editor with Rosemary Mann as photographer produce three informative newsletters per year for members with a mixture of fun and hard-hitting articles. Outings and talks are organised by Naomi Richardson as Events Secretary. Activities in 2019 included talks to celebrate 20 years of the Museum of Scotland, on developments in Abbey Strand, on the making of Classical Edinburgh, on Edinburgh's Tavern Culture, on Open Streets and on the Scottish explorer William Speirs Bruce. There was a visit to the North Bridge restoration site and walks round the Castle Rock and related to the Edinburgh History of Printing. There was also a Christmas party in December at the Augustine United Church.

The members of the OTA Committee are volunteers and without their commitment and hard work the achievements of the Association would not be possible. On behalf of the members I would like to express our gratitude to them for all their efforts.

Financially, the OTA remains on a sound basis:

<b>Summary Accounts for year to 31.08.19</b>		Receipts	Payments	Surplus/ (Deficit)
Events		1,229	968	261
Donations		222	230	(8)
All other receipts and payments		850	952	(102)
Total		£2,301	£2,150	£151
Balances	31.08.17	Receipts	Payments	31.08.18
	£6,576	£2,301	£2,150	£6,727

At 31 August 2019, the Association had 195 individual and 7 corporate members. It is hoped that putting the newsletter on the OTA website and using Eventbrite so non-members can book for events on-line will bring in new members.

New members are always welcome so please encourage your friends to join. The yearly subscription is modest and membership is open to anyone who lives in, works in or simply cares for the Old Town of Edinburgh. I would like to once more thank all our members for their continued support. Further information, links to other websites, newsletters and activities can be found on our website [www.eota.org.uk](http://www.eota.org.uk)

In the future we look forward to the formal opening of the Physic Garden and the Abbey Strand buildings at Holyrood House. It is important too that the Old Town Association continues to maintain established contacts with other groups to work collectively for the benefit of the Old Town and its residents.

Barbara Logue  
Convener