Minutes of George Street Quarterly Public Stakeholder Meeting

Date – 15 June 2015, Venue – West Drawing Room at Assembly Rooms, George Street, Edinburgh

Chair & Minutes – Iain MacPhail, City of Edinburgh Council, City Centre Programme Manager Contact Email - iain.macphail@edinburgh.gov.uk

++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++

* This is the 3rd quarterly meeting of the group. All are welcome, including members of the public with no other form of affiliation (other than a wish to see George Street achieve its potential). As with the two previous meetings there was a full house in attendance, which is testimony to the passion, commitment and level of engagement of the participants, and sheds light on the importance of the street and in helping it to achieve its potential.
* Those present included a wide array of representatives including some from the local Community Council, heritage bodies, sustainable transport groups, disability groups, individual business interests, the local Business Improvement District, Council officials, bus companies, taxi firms, cyclists, the emergency services, and members of the public.

++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++

* The purpose of the year’s trial on George Street has been to test out the impacts on George Street (and on surrounding streets) when there is additional space given over to pedestrians, cyclists and for activity (not only during the summer and winter festivals, but year-round).
* The Council has made strenuous efforts to make this the most transparent and grassroots-led project in the city. This can be seen in three key areas, related to the research package.
1. The project has, at its core, a belief that a trial is only worthwhile if it is subject to robust and credible testing throughout. To that end, an independent research package was tendered on Public Contracts Scotland and 100 on-street interviews a month are taking place, as well as gathering unimpeachable electronic data, on a consistent basis, from sources such as electronic footfall counters & environmental health data. In a project where there are a wide range of conflicting interests, it is imperative to have evidence based decisions, rather than partisan hunches/hearsay.
2. The stakeholder groups (including interested members of the public) have subsequently been put in charge of the oversight of the research work, throughout the year. This was a risk for a Council to take (paying for, but not overseeing, the research package) but it has been the right thing to do. Throughout the year, stakeholders have received the quarterly reports in raw form, unchanged and unspun, and they have received the data at precisely the same moment as any officials or Elected Members. With this project, what you see is what you get.
3. The purpose of the quarterly meetings is therefore for the public gathering to receive a presentation from the research company (who are independent of the Council) and to give the public gathering an opportunity to interrogate the data. The group has, in the past, made suggested changes to questions being asked, in order to be satisfied that the right information was being requested & recorded. It has been an exercise intended to follow best practice when it comes to transparency and public ownership. The outcomes of the 15 June 2015 Meeting were as follows:
* The trial layout was never a blueprint, but it has generated conditions where it’s not a binary choice of “do you prefer the old layout or the new”? Instead, it is about acknowledging that the previous layout was perhaps not George Street reaching its full potential (the trial layout is not the street at full potential either), and acknowledging that changes are coming to the area (not least with the revamped St James Centre) which all makes 2015 an appropriate moment in time to ask “what does George Street need to reach its full potential”?
* An independent designer, Ironside Farrar, has been appointed to lead the design process for the long term layout of George Street. They were introduced to the stakeholders, having emerged successful from a recent publicly-tendered contract, which attracted exceptionally high quality applicants from Scotland and abroad. Their immediate task is to work with stakeholders (ensuring continuity and ensuring all input to date has been influential) to produce Design Principles by September. This process includes a public “charette” (a planning term for a public meeting with a very focussed agenda, that seeks to move a process such as this one from a mass of information and input towards a tangible and meaningful conclusion – in this case, to produce a set of 6 to 8 Design Principles).
* The Design Principles would then be capable of being applied to any given layout of the street, helping to identify which are strong contenders and which may be more easily discarded. It is a robust and credible process, that has been endorsed by many with a planning or heritage background (a common response being “we may choose to agree or disagree with the eventual outcome, but we cannot take issue with the process, which has been conducted in a sound manner”).
* In terms of timeline, the Design Principles will be identified over the summer. These will be expected to assist in identifying a shortlist of perhaps two or three leading contender layouts (with the aim being to answer the question “what layout would best help George Street achieve its potential”). The outcomes will be placed before Transport & Environment Committee at the Council in late 2015, with a recommendation that further work should be undertaken on the leading contenders, to assess their respective impact on the sense of place, function, heritage & movement in George Street and the wider Edinburgh City Centre. That process ought to emerge with a preferred layout in the first half of 2016. That would in turn become the subject of a Traffic Regulation Order in 2016, and that (as with any TRO) would be subject to public consultation. When that process completes, any works could begin. This timeline would allow for George Street to be settled a good 2 or 3 years before the St James Centre redevelopment was completed, during a landmark period where (in 2017) it will celebrate the 250th anniversary of James Craig’s vision for the New Town.

The stakeholder group approved the following as being principles which have emerged from the trial

1. For the long-term layout, symmetry of the street layout is paramount, as is celebrating (not blocking out from view) the world class built heritage on George Street.
2. Any activity should incorporate or design-in removable temporary coverage (e.g. the large umbrellas at the Italian Centre in John Street, Glasgow) as those allow for an unhindered civic use of civic space when required (such as at Light Night); and they provide a public sense of buzz, not restricting the increased atmosphere to a private box.
3. Cycle facilities are to be included in the long run design, but not on the present layout. There is strong support for a segregated cycle lane arranged on a conventional layout, with Westbound cyclists on the southern carriageway, eastbound on the northern.
4. George Street should be accessible to all – this is not a straightforward task, given Edinburgh’s volcanic topography, and George Street itself is built upon a ridge. The views of locals, disabled groups, businesses and public transport all important here.
5. Car Parking – this has emerged as clearly the most divided issue. Some want no car parking at all, others (a similar sized minority) want car parking retained at 100% of current levels. The majority view is “retain some parking” as it is important for locals, shoppers, disabled groups and others. A reasonable approach may be to assess the car parking levels (and the distance from the shops) that exist in other comparable high end retail streets, where many George Street businesses have outlets, such as New Bond Street and Buchanan Street. It is an issue for this summer’s design discussions to ponder.
6. Seasonality – in order to run a meaningful trial on a northern European street like George Street, it has been necessary to run it across all four seasons of the year. The way people use the street is discernibly different during different times of year and three identifiable “seasons” have emerged. They are
7. August & December – huge footfall, related to festival events
8. April to October (excluding August) - busy, more pedestrians
9. October to March (excluding December) – fewer pedestrians, an argument that you need more vehicle traffic, parking, for ‘buzz’.

There are other aspects of design detail (as opposed to principle) that will become important, for example in terms of seeking to declutter more, and to changing the pedestrian crossing at Hanover Street to provide a much clearer desire line, and a more simplified straightforward crossing.

The group was content to pass the 6 principles listed above to Ironside Farrar as the output of the research package to date.

++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++

**And finally…** George Street has received a number of accolades this year, and contributed to Edinburgh receiving the Entente Florale gold accreditation, plus the capital has pipped rival cities like London, Glasgow & Liverpool to having the UK’s first “parklets”, on George Street. One final trend, though, that has emerged from the research package is that (i) people from other cities are more excited about George Street than those from Edinburgh and (ii) those from the Old Town are more excited about specific aspects (such as the planters & parklets) than those in the New Town.

As Ironside Farrar were introduced as the successful tenderer for taking forward the longer term layout design process, the chair of the meetings (the Council’s Iain MacPhail) announced to the room his role in the project would come to an end once the street returns to its former layout in September and a report on conclusions/lessons learned/next steps is presented by him to the Council’s Transport and Environment Committee in later 2015.

Iain thanked all stakeholders for the exceptional levels of passion, engagement, commitment and talent that they had brought to the process, and encouraged all groups to continue an involvement with the design discussions that Ironside Farrar will take forward over the summer. Meeting closed.