Connecting Scotland: how Scottish organisations engage internationally

The City of Edinburgh Council

Questions

What international activities are happening now in your sector and/or organisation? Please describe how and why these activities take place. Are other sectors or organisations involved? What do these activities contribute or achieve?

The City of Edinburgh Council is involved in a very wide range of international activities which support the development of the city through international best practice and profiling, economic and cultural diplomacy; and which reflect the role of a capital city which has a strong consular base, increasing international connectivity and visitors, and is engaged extensively with international delegations and events.

Many international projects involve a range of partners both overseas and within the city. Spheres of activity include schools, higher education, libraries, festivals, cultural and heritage associations, the business community and professional associations, inward investors, the Consular Corps and international institutions. A wide range of service areas within the Council access and share international best practice through EU and other funded projects.

Some current examples are given below.

Edinburgh has very strong links with China, many of them having evolved over a very long period of time. A niche opportunity has been identified for Edinburgh to harness specific benefits for the creative and tech sectors by the creation of soft landing / incubation space with one of the first cities of innovation in China, Shenzhen. From the outset Edinburgh has worked with the Scottish Government on this project within the context of the Scotland China Plan. The Memorandum of Understanding between Edinburgh and Shenzhen was witnessed at Ministerial level and support continues via the office of the First Secretary, Scottish Affairs, in Beijing.

In embarking on this project, The City of Edinburgh Council recognises the importance of long term planning, detailed research and understanding, and the added value of all levels of government working together. We began by arranging a secondment from the Shenzhen government into our Edinburgh External Relations / Investor Support teams to secure early and thorough understanding of each other’s creative and tech sectors. While the project is still at developmental stage, much progress has been made and the Edinburgh Creative Exchange incubation space will open in Shenzhen in May, while the Shenzhen equivalent will be hosted in Edinburgh from September. This is not Edinburgh’s only project with China; we continue to work on a number of international engagements with further Chinese cities.

The cities of Edinburgh and Florence celebrate their 50th year of twinning in 2015. This anniversary year is being used as a platform to build further connections for the future in areas such as the profiling and celebration of local food, film and literature,
engaging the public and using existing events and connections across the cities. A multimedia event took place in Edinburgh in March 2015 with a range of partners: the Italian Consulate, the Italian Cultural Institute, Scottish Poetry Library, Edinburgh City of Literature Office, Florence City Council UNESCO office, Edinburgh College of Art, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and the Talbot Rice Gallery. This project saw the launch of a collection of the work of celebrated Italian war poet Ungaretti, alongside contemporary translations and Scottish cultural responses, including poetry, visual art, animation, music and sculpture. The project highlighted the value of transnational relationships and the opportunity for learning and sharing in the difficult subject of war. The project also emphasised the importance of language and the expression of self alongside the value of literature and cultural heritage – a strategic interest for both historic cities. The project additionally drew on both cities’ strengths as members of the UNESCO Creative Cities network. The project will be replicated in Florence in June.

A wide range of projects are ongoing with twin city Munich, a relationship which is 60 years old. Using the EU Funded LEONARDO vocational exchange for professionals, placements have taken place between the Economic Development team within both cities. One such placement included discussions with Bio M, the cluster of Munich based life science companies. Munich is home to Germany’s largest grouping of life science companies. A visit was subsequently arranged for companies and researchers from Munich to visit Edinburgh’s BioQuarter followed by a return visit by Edinburgh based researchers. These visits were focussed on the development of research and business collaborations. Interest in Edinburgh at a Bavarian level remains strong, while Munich represents a strong festivals market for Edinburgh and is well served by the direct air link. There are excellent relations with the Consulates in both cities.

Since 1995, Edinburgh has co-operated closely with the Polish city of Krakow via a Partnership Agreement based on the areas of architecture and design, planning, culture and education. The Partnership Agreement has been extended and re-signed mainly on a five year basis since then and has grown to include additional areas of interest. The Partnership Agreement was last renewed in 2014 for a further five years to 2019. The Edinburgh – Krakow cooperation has the support of the Polish Consul General in Edinburgh as well as the Polish Cultural Festival, The Polish-Scottish Heritage project, the Edinburgh UNESCO World Heritage Office and the Scottish-Polish Society in Edinburgh.

Further areas of shared interest include urban planning and development in World Heritage areas, including the maintenance of traditional setted streets (cobble stones), community engagement and placemaking. In 2015 there will be two joint workshops with exchange visits between the cities for experts to consider case studies. The incoming Edinburgh visit was designed to fit alongside the World Heritage Day events being organised by Edinburgh World Heritage (EWH) Trust and Historic Scotland. The Council’s partnership with EWH has informed the strategic content of these workshops.

With the support of City of Edinburgh Council and the Municipality of Krakow the Scottish Polish Cultural Society in presented a photography exhibition in 2014. The exhibition (“City Lights”) was displayed in both Edinburgh and in Krakow between September and October, alongside a programme of cultural offerings which
celebrated the similarities between the two cities. This exhibition received wide public support in Edinburgh, particularly from its substantial Polish migrant community.

Edinburgh is the founding city of UNESCO’s Creative City Network and with the support of the City of Edinburgh Council, the Edinburgh UNESCO City of Literature Trust has been instrumental in the development of the network to 11 designated cities. In 2013 Krakow was the 7th city to join the network. The Edinburgh City of Literature Trust is also working to support bids from new cities including Barcelona (Spain), Baghdad (Iraq), Kampala (Uganda) and others, placing Edinburgh at the heart of this growing network.

Since the network’s formation in 2004, the Trust has developed a range of projects, linking organisations and individuals across Edinburgh with other Cities of Literature; most recently a showcase of Krakow writers at the Edinburgh International Book Festival in August 2014 and a showcase of Edinburgh writers in Krakow in October 2014, and under development, a new digital TV channel for the Cities of Literature network, led by Edinburgh. This work positions Edinburgh as an innovative, world-leading literary capital, promoting our literary excellence to the world, supporting literary tourism for the capital, and providing opportunities for organisations and individuals in Edinburgh.

Do you think your sector and/or organisation is effective in participating in international activities? If not, what would help you to make improvements? What prevents you from making improvements now?

As a local authority we maintain a strong international outlook; fostering many international events and projects and a number of mutually beneficial relationships. While much of this has been managed historically through arrangements such as twin and partner cities, the focus today is on effective relationship management, and partnerships and resource sharing for the development and delivery of projects. Effective areas include drawing international talent, supporting flight route development / connectivity, sustaining and delivering investment and profile in economic and cultural spheres, profiling the city and publicising / reaching out for good practice internationally. Local authorities have limited resources to participate in international activities and thus rely on in-kind staff time, the support of other organisations and EU and other funding opportunities where available. The City of Edinburgh Council has been a member of the European network for Cities, EUROCITIES, since the early 1990s – this enables matches between city strategies and helps maximise funding potential for projects. The Open Innovation project, led by Edinburgh, is one of the largest funded under the Interreg North West Europe programme.

What should organisations in Scotland do to be effective internationally? Are you aware of any good examples of this from Scotland or another country?

It is important to build on those assets and contacts which are of international interest, identify niche opportunities which create distinct benefits and take a project-led approach to ensure delivery. Building early engagement and understanding takes considerable time and relationship management. When governmental bodies work together strategically from an early point in international initiatives, the maximisation of resources and contacts can be very effective indeed.
The advantage that a city / local authority has in terms of international relationship management is that the Council is focused on the delivery of practical projects at ‘on the ground’ level and the pooling of goodwill and resources both locally and by the global partner for the long term or for fixed periods of activity. Greater recognition by the Scottish Government, Scottish Development International and Visit Scotland of the contribution which the major cities / local authorities working with their global partners can add – or bring as a lead player with certain geographies – would significantly enhance the delivery of Scotland’s Economic Strategy and Scotland’s International Framework. Consideration should be given to the role of cities / local authorities in helping to drive and facilitate shared and more specific international ambitions by properly resourcing a number of key initiatives. The City of Edinburgh Council would be pleased to work on a pilot basis with the national agencies and other lead authorities to demonstrate the value of such an approach.

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April 2015