

## **People and Places: Make Leith Better Project LEITH BLUEPRINT**

### **BACKGROUND**

In 2015, Leith Creative conducted a cultural mapping exercise in order to better understand Leith's cultural resources and creative industries. We found that Leith is a unique area of concentrated cultural and creative activity, identifying nine creative hubs, eleven supporting cultural assets and four local and national festivals.

Building on this research and network, since early 2017, Leith Creative has been working to bring a wider community together through creative means to talk about the future of Leith.

Through an engagement process called a design charrette\* and utilising our local creative capacity, we have been asking the following simple questions of people who live and/or work in the Leith area:

- What do you think Leith's greatest assets are?
- What do you think Leith's biggest challenges are?
- What steps would you take to make Leith better?

We recognise that Leith has been victim to a series of failed masterplans. It is not our intention to create another one. Instead this Blueprint forms the result of our findings.

While not exhaustive, we have attempted to represent fully the diverse views from the many communities of Leith with which we have engaged, and which make Leith special.

Morvern and Duncan, Leith Creative

\*charrette /fa'rEt/

noun: charette a public meeting or workshop devoted to a concerted effort to solve a problem or plan the design of something.

### **INTRODUCTION**

We recognise that this Blueprint comes at a time not only of great opportunity for our community, but also of great difficulty. Traditional systems of power are changing, our public services are stretched, our civic resources are declining and for many individuals and neighbourhoods, development has been exclusive, has stagnated or has been ill conceived or badly executed.

In the last decade Leith has continued to undergo significant changes, with more to come. The financial crash and subsequent economic downturn in 2007/8 changed the trajectory of Leith's spatial development. The area increasingly became known as an attractive alternative place to live and work. Now that the local economy has stabilised and is experiencing growth, Leith residents old and new are noticing the rise in property prices and an intensification of development; rapidly pricing many out of the area.

While Leith Street is currently closed to traffic to allow for the redevelopment of the St. James Centre, the former Leith Walk tram shed is being demolished for continued development. The gap site created is likely to act as a temporary store for the modern-day tram as infrastructure is installed down Leith Walk to Newhaven, causing further disruption to a community already diminished by a decade of roadworks.

The way our public services are delivered is also changing. Leith has now become part of the wider North-East Edinburgh Locality, with a wider remit and set of priorities as a result.

As land and property prices continue to rise, buildings are demolished and gap sites filled, local communities, creative businesses and grassroots culture are all impacted. It is the pace of development that is most palpable, generating uncertainty about the future of the area.

Time will tell how these changes will affect Leith and its residents, however, in light of our identified creative capacity, we want to ask if Leith can do better?

## **METHODOLOGY**

The People and Places: Make Leith Better project has seen a programme of wide-ranging community consultation delivered through both online and face-to-face surveying; creative public engagement activities; a series of focused round table conversations - structured across our creative hub and community network; and a two-day community conference, all within the EH6/EH7 locality.

A total of 748 people responded to our survey. Of this representative group, over half (53%) live in Leith, over a third (35%) both live and work in Leith, with the remaining (12%) working in the Leith area. In addition, over 2000 people attended one of our 18 core events or spent some other substantive time engaging with the programme and contributing ideas.

Focusing on four identified community clusters within the area, creative activities happened in and around: Out of the Blue Drill Hall; Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop; St Margaret's House and the Newkirkgate Community Education Centre.

As part of the programme, we worked closely with the following partners:

Lateral North developed a 'Leith Interactive Map'. Popping up at key community events and venues the map charted local challenges, opportunities and assets at a micro-scale. [lateralnorth.com](http://lateralnorth.com)

Biomorphis developed 'Leith Listings', a new directory created by locals for the Leith neighbourhood identifying buildings, structures, people and places of local importance. A total of 235 listings were submitted. [biomorphis.com](http://biomorphis.com)

HERE+NOW developed the 'Place Standard Wheel', a large 3D version of the Place Standard, a Scottish Government tool for assessing places via key themes. The portable wheel toured locally visiting several different communities. [thehereandnow.org.uk](http://thehereandnow.org.uk)

## INTERACTIVE MAP

LATERAL NORTH popped up at the Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop (ESW), Leith Market, Leith Gala Day, Victoria Primary and Ocean Terminal. Members of the public were invited to draw and place counters onto an Interactive Map, highlighting a variety of local areas that required attention.

Most mentioned:

1. Increased public access to the waterfront
2. Improved park infrastructure
3. More public green spaces and associated community projects
4. Better cycle routes with increased connectivity
5. Investment for Leith Theatre as an arts hub

Lateral North also hosted a curated conversation at ESW, focusing on the need for a dedicated mid-sized live music venue in Leith, which included contributions from the City of Edinburgh Council, Electric Fields Festival and Leith Walk Councillor Gordon Munro. They went on to facilitate a series of workshops looking at potential public performance spaces along the cycle path by ESW, and are continuing to develop and prototype structures.

## LEITH LISTINGS

BIOMORPHIS undertook a range of on the street interviews and events, with Custom Lane and Out of the Blue Drill Hall (OOTB), generating over 235 suggestions for features on the Leith Listings - a directory of buildings, structures, people and places of local significance. A total of 121 tangible and intangible items of Leith's cultural heritage have made it onto the ever-growing index, each nominated by residents aged from 8 to 80.

Top five most mentioned items:

1. Leith History Mural
2. DOK Artist Space
3. Leith Links
4. Out of the Blue Drill Hall
5. Trees on Leith Walk

Biomorphis also hosted a curated conversation at OOTB, in conjunction with the Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, focused on development in and around Leith Walk. Residents and guests, including representatives from local music venue and bar Leith Depot, discussed the notion of precarity in relation to aggressive property development in the area.

## PLACE STANDARD WHEEL

HERE+NOW developed the Place Standard Wheel, a giant 3D version of the Place Standard, a Scottish Government framework for assessing places. The Wheel appeared at St Margaret's House and Out of the Blue Drill Hall, along with touring locations including, Easter Road, Albert Street, The Ripple Project in Restalrig and the Kirkgate during LeithLate17's opening night.

Highest scoring themes (average total score, out of a possible 7):

1. Public transport (6.2)
2. Identity and belonging (5.9)
3. Social contact (5.7)

Lowest scoring themes:

1. Influence and sense of control (3.2)
2. Care and maintenance (3.3)
3. Traffic and parking (3.7)

Here+Now also hosted a curated conversation at St Margaret's House on the subject of Identity and belonging, with invited guests including Leith Walk Councillor Susan Rae and representatives of The Ripple Project. Topics discussed included differing identities for those on the periphery of Leith, and the impact housing development has on the identity of place.

#### ADDITIONAL EVENTS

With the aim of connecting and empowering local communities in the area, Leith Creative facilitated a number of additional cultural and creative interventions. These included: Creative Circles Leith - Quarterly coffee morning events at Custom Lane, in association with Creative Edinburgh. Designed to bring creatives and other local stakeholders together.

Make Leith Better - Pitching and participatory budgeting event, in association with First Port. Individuals or organisations were awarded £500 to make an idea for the community a reality.

Street Huts with Biomorphis - Temporary street closure, in association with Lorne Street Primary School and Jameson Place Sheltered Housing. An afternoon of safe play and intergenerational exchange.

Gentrification Screening - In association with Deptford Cinema and Leith Community Cinema. Free screening accompanied by a debate exploring gentrification.

Leith Walk Tram Shed - In conjunction with OOTB. A lunchtime conversation about possible future short-term uses of the last brownfield site on Leith Walk.

#### COMMUNITY CONFERENCE

As part of the project, Leith Creative ran a free two-day community conference at the Newkirkgate Community Education Centre, where all three creative engagement methods were on show. During roundtable conversations, members of the public, local stakeholders and representatives were invited to debate the largest themes coming out of the Leith Creative research to date.

Saturday focused on how arts and culture can contribute to the social and spatial development of neighbourhoods. Special guest speakers included John Paul McGroarty (formerly Leith Festival, Leith Theatre), Julia Amour (Festivals Edinburgh) and Shona McCarthy (Edinburgh Fringe Festival).

Sunday looked at how we can better identify, protect and enhance the local character and identity of Leith, particularly through heritage and planning. Speakers included Ben Macpherson (MSP Edinburgh North and Leith), Barbara Cummins (Historic Environment Scotland) and Will Garrett (City of Edinburgh Council).

Overwhelmingly, the need for more democratic non-partisan leadership was highlighted at the conference, with the possible introduction of a development trust regularly mentioned.

## **ASSETS AND CHALLENGES**

Alongside the three engagement methods described overleaf, through online and face-to-face surveying, members of the Leith community were asked to identify assets and challenges in the area. Answers could refer to anything from the physical infrastructure and built environment to more intangible aspects of place such as attitudes and attributes. Below we have listed the top five themes that emerged from the research, in order of importance to respondents, with some additional context.

### **ASSETS**

#### People and community

Overwhelmingly the local community was cited as Leith's greatest asset with over half of respondents commenting on this aspect, specifically the importance of a strong community spirit to the area.

#### Services and facilities

People cited the variety and proliferation of independent local businesses (particularly on Leith Walk) as one of Leith's major assets, alongside libraries, churches, health and community centres and cultural spaces.

#### Diversity

In addition to Leith's strong sense of community, the diverse social and cultural mix of people that inhabit the area (also reflected in the wide range of businesses) was recognised as a huge strength to the area, contributing to Leith's vibrant atmosphere.

#### Environment and amenities

People cited public parks and green spaces such as Leith Links amongst Leith's greatest assets, alongside the historic waterfront of The Shore and general proximity to the sea via The Water of Leith.

#### Creativity and culture

Alongside the social and cultural mix of people in Leith, the input of the creative community was highlighted. This is seen as making a valuable contribution to the character and diversity

of the area. Out of the Blue Drill Hall; the new DOK Artist Space and the Leith Theatre were all mentioned as spaces of particular importance.

## **CHALLENGES**

Improving local environment and amenities

The care of parks and waterways was seen as a challenge, particularly when tackling litter and other mess. There was a call to protect historic buildings rather than allowing them to decline. A demand for increased access to the waterfront and docks was also prevalent.

Housing

There was concern over changes taking place in Leith, particularly in relation to property development and the subsequent impact on the identity of the area. The lack of affordable housing (especially for families) was cited as a major challenge.

Regeneration

Balancing competing needs was a priority, particularly in terms of delivering more socially focused development. Housing expansion was reported to have a negative impact on already overloaded services. There was also a call to support locally independent businesses, who are perceived to be under threat.

Connecting the community

There was acknowledgement that the various communities in Leith need to integrate better, as well as increasing links to cultural activities for all. An appeal for civic spaces for people to mix more meaningfully was made.

Governance and systems

Respondents described being effectively marginalised or simply ignored by tokenistic consultation. Likewise, they demanded better strategic thinking regarding development. A perceived lack of public investment was noted. There were calls for support to reanimate empty space and to better co-ordinate community initiatives.

## **WHAT WOULD YOU DO?**

Taking into account the identified assets and challenges, we now consider responses to the question of making Leith better, and to highlight action areas in relation to the challenges. It is significant to note that we observed an overwhelming perceived lack of agency on the part of respondents, which was backed up by findings from the Place Standard Wheel, where people's influence and sense of control in Leith scored lowest.

## **ACTION AREA 1 : ENVIRONMENT**

The environment in Leith was identified by almost a third of respondents as one of its major challenges. Respondents came forward with a number of suggestions for action.

- Improve local green spaces and parks

There is a desire to enhance the quality of greenspaces and parks, including improved

environmental standards, as well as to maintain and reinstate infrastructure, with specific reference made during Leith Listings to the removal of trees on Leith Walk.

- Improve access to the seafront

Leith's seafront and the Water of Leith were also identified as underused assets with respondents commenting that the quality of space is poor, waterbodies polluted and the waterfront inaccessible.

- Greater support for environmental groups

While responsibility cannot lie with citizens alone, putting weight and money behind existing local initiatives, such as Leithers Don't Litter, might help to collectively improve the local environment.

- Invest in civic space, create more places for people to enjoy amenities

Respondents called for better management and investment in public spaces, including the Kirkgate, providing more places for people to sit and enjoy amenities. Leith Walk was also highlighted as another area with no stopping places other than cafes and bars.

## **ACTION AREA 2 : AFFORDABILITY**

Overwhelmingly research illustrated that affordability was an area of concern, both in terms of housing and business accommodation. House prices and rents in Leith have risen steeply in the last decade. This has the effect of pricing individuals and businesses out of the area, particularly those who rely on private rented accommodation or other insecure tenures.

- Raise the amount of affordable housing and mix of different types of housing

Respondents pointed to a serious need for more affordable housing in the area and for different types of housing, particularly family housing. Community members expressed dismay at new developments of unaffordable, luxury or student flats and were concerned about the impact of short term letting, particularly Airbnb, contributing to rising prices and the lack of availability.

- Maintain flexible accommodation and increase support small businesses

Respondents worried about the effects of new or re-development on rising ground rents and identified the need for more flexible accommodation. Subsidised rates or rents connected to income would also encourage small businesses and creatives to stay in Leith.

- Strategic changes, new and innovative housing models

Specific suggestions included: strategic changes to planning policy to raise the amount of affordable housing to 50% rather than the 25% currently required of developments; approaches such as the City of Edinburgh Council taking back land which has been empty or undeveloped for housing; and third sector organisations developing new or innovative housing models e.g. co-housing projects or self-build.

- Establish a rent pressure zone in Leith and regulate short-term housing

This suggestion has the potential to control rent rises and to regulate the Airbnb market. Better regulation could also ensure that properties are retained for housing and improve

security of tenure.

### **ACTION AREA 3 : PUBLIC ASSETS**

Affordability is coupled with perceived threats to character and identity, the loss of assets and the proliferation of homogenised development. This has led respondents to think creatively about how we can deliver land and assets to better meet community needs.

- Land buyouts/public asset transfer

Ongoing projects including the Duncan Place Resource Centre; Leith Theatre; and the emerging London Street Church buyout were highlighted on the Leith Interactive Map as examples of what we should be doing on a larger scale.

- Support existing service providers

Many people suggested that more secure investment in existing service providers, such as the Citadel Youth Centre, would help to address disadvantage, contributing to community life.

- Further public asset mapping

There was a strong suggestion that a starting point would be to map assets so that people are aware of what land is available or under public ownership.

- Stop asset stripping/degradation

There was acknowledgement by respondents that Leith has experienced a continuous and substantive loss of public assets which have not been replaced. This includes buildings, environmental facilities, amenities and public art.

### **ACTION AREA 4 : ARTS, CULTURE AND EVENTS**

With additional investment, arts and cultural events could act as a bridge, bringing Leith's diverse communities together in substantive and meaningful ways.

- Support cultural integration and improve access to arts and cultural activities

While the diverse social and cultural mix of Leith is cited as a key attribute, there is also acknowledgement of the challenge in terms of integrating traditional and more recent communities, as well as increasing broader access to arts and cultural activities.

- Support year-round activities with structural investment

Community events like the local Leith Festival, LeithLate, the Mela and buildings such as the Leith Theatre, were seen to be supporting local culture and encouraging community connectedness. However, the lack of investment or support from the local authority and other funders was perceived to be a threat.

- Improve connectivity

Better connectivity also underpinned respondents' comments who suggested signposting low or no-cost activities for residents, particularly families and young people, alongside the need for a more cohesive and navigable tourist offer.



- Creative repurposing of land/unused buildings

Supporting the creative repurposing of land and unused buildings, improving facilities in parks and investing in cultural and creative infrastructure were all cited as options that would support more equitable development.

One solution, already policy at a national level in Scandinavia and other parts of Europe, is a 'per cent for art' scheme. This ensures that private development enriches both civic space and community life. Using this model, already in place in England, we should consider as a priority how developer contributions might help to deliver strategic cultural and other infrastructure in Leith.

### **ACTION AREA 5 : LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND EMPOWERMENT**

Respondents were critical of existing practices relating to the delivery of services particularly planning and environmental services.

- Improve transparency in decision-making

Across the board there is a feeling that the community are not in control of the choices that affect the area and there is often little transparency surrounding decision-making. This has led to disempowerment and criticism of existing service providers, primarily the City of Edinburgh Council.

- Support connectivity and innovation in service delivery

There is recognition that there is a lot of capacity in Leith with numerous groups and organisations operating. There is also, however, a lack of co-ordination between projects, local leadership or a clear, collective direction of travel. To address this, respondents suggested more strategic and facilitated co-working across sectors.

- Establish a development body to take responsibility for leadership

The need for non-partisan leadership was identified, potentially in the form of a community development trust, which could oversee strategic priorities for the area and ensure that funds and capacity are directed towards these.

- Support debate in the public realm

Despite a desire for collective community vision, it is clear from our survey, that there are many different perspectives within Leith about key issues affecting the place i.e. the tram, tourism and housing. Whatever systems emerge to address development, this points to the need for further debate around central issues and more representative and democratic forms of decision-making.

### **ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **THE STEEL SHED (DOK ARTIST SPACE)**

- Save this culturally important heritage asset, the last vestige of Henry Robbs Shipyard in Leith, currently under threat of removal.
- Needs gifted to the people of Leith and relocated to a historically relevant site.

#### THE KIRKGATE

- Improve and redesign the Kirkgate in order to make it a vibrant centre for Leith; a meeting space, performance space and destination.
- Make it more welcoming with benches for more social interaction.
- Increase capacity and frequency of local markets, animate with arts and cultural events.

#### LEITH THEATRE

- Invest significantly in Leith Theatre so that it can reopen to the public on a permanent, year-round, basis.
- Make the theatre a fully functioning performance space and a means of bringing Leith's community together.

#### GREAT JUNCTION STREET

- Improve the pedestrian environment through wider footpaths and increased safe crossing points.
- Address on-street parking along route to ease traffic flow.
- Recommission murals in the surrounding area and invest in local businesses.

#### LEITH WALK

- Install more stopping places and public seating on Leith Walk, improving social interaction and retail.
- Bring back trees to the Walk and adjoining streets in order to make it more of a boulevard.
- Increased cycle parking and possible pedestrianised streets off the Walk.
- Develop a speakers' corner at the Foot of the Walk.

#### LEITH DOCKS

- Create a public walkway along the waterfront from The Shore to Granton via Ocean Terminal, reconnecting Leith to the water. Taking the fence down from around the Scottish Government's Victoria Quay would aid this.
- Improve access to the docks and support maritime assets, including SS Explorer.

#### ENCOURAGE TOURISM

- Better signage, both physical and digital, in order to promote the area to visitors and encourage local people to interact with Leith.
- Extend heritage trails, audio tours and oral history projects with local peoples' stories about the area which can tie in with local schools.
- Invest in local festivals and events.

#### PARKS AND GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

- More green space management, more bins.
- Invest in smaller green spaces in Leith
- Designated 'dog areas' in larger parks, separate from children's play areas.
- Form a green network in Leith connecting clean green spaces and waterways.
- Improve the maintenance of the cyclepath network.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Over the last six months, Leith Creative has engaged with over 2000 people who live and/or work across Leith, asking them what they feel is important and how we can all make our place better.

The results have been numerous, complex and sometimes contradictory. Alongside a strong, and proud, sense of identity and belonging in the area, people also feel a lack of agency and are concerned about the future. Through the discussion generated, the Blueprint has identified five action areas - these have been broken down into action points set against identified key challenges.

It is significant to note that many of the suggestions we received are outwith the control of Leith Creative, or even the community more generally. This is particularly true in terms of our built environment, where systems of land ownership and planning dictate what is possible. As such, whilst this research and the charrette process can identify the key priorities for Leith, without greater partnership working, any steps taken will necessarily be limited.

To address this, respondents suggested we consider the potential of establishing a Community Development Trust for Leith. This could provide the forum, tools, and structure to achieve the commitment needed from a broad range of agencies, citizens, commercial and political stakeholders.

The next stage would be to assign responsibilities going forward. This could form the basis of a joint commitment for the future. Leith Creative could be in a position to work with others to deliver on this, with continued and increased support from local and national partners.

One thing is clear, Leith remains a hotbed of cultural and community-based activity with a variety of stakeholders that care deeply about its future. If we can harness this potential for community activism and create spaces for people to come together, whilst generating a greater sense of agency and influence locally, Leith could prove to be the test bed for new approaches in community-led development.