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## **Event tourism, public policy and socio-cultural development in Dublin**

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### **Abstract**

In a highly globalised, competitive world, urban strategies often highlight festivals and events as activities which can attract tourists and investors, extend the tourism season and boost the economy. Event tourism as a term is now well established in the tourism lexicon, however, it is usually employed in quite a limited way that offers only partial insights into a complex phenomenon. To redress this deficit, this paper examines the case of Dublin, where for the last twenty-five years, policy-makers have been using festivals and events to boost the city's international standing. The aim is to investigate whether policy-makers can strategically use events to further tourism goals while simultaneously fostering socio-cultural development more broadly. Methodologically, the study reported undertakes a detailed, critical analysis of public policy documents that relate festivals and events to tourism. It finds a range of policy perspectives at play but overall, there is a clear tendency for festivals and events to be framed through an urban entrepreneurial lens that under-appreciates social and cultural issues. In contrast, a second set of findings reported from primary research undertaken at one of the main tourism-oriented festivals in the city show how festival experiences can generate enjoyment, sociability, pride, inclusion and belonging for both tourists and other city users alike, while simultaneously producing economic returns. Together, the findings of the policy analysis and the empirical case point to the need to re-think how events and tourism intersect to achieve optimal outcomes, especially in these post pandemic times when cities the world over are searching for more sustainable tourism futures. The study recommends that event tourism policy-making adopt broader, more holistic terms of reference and suggests that lessons from practice could be employed to inform better policies.

**Keywords:** festivals and events; tourism; public policy; socio-cultural development; inclusion; Dublin.

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## Introduction

Cities everywhere develop strategies to remain competitive and attract investment in order to improve infrastructures, create jobs and multiplier effects (Sassen, 1991). It is in this context that over the last 30 years, event tourism – the strategic use of festivals and events to further tourism aims – has become increasingly incorporated into urban political agendas as one of the strategies used by cities to secure a place on the global stage. An extensive literature agrees that events boost city imagery (Getz and Page, 2016), underpin urban regeneration strategies, animate city spaces and communities, create tourist demand (Connell, Page and Meyer, 2015), and generate jobs and revenue (Foley *et. al.*, 2012). Conversely, relatively little is known about how event tourism contributes to urban social sustainability in terms of e.g. social well-being, inclusion and equity (Knox and Meyer, 2013; Mair, Chien, Kelly and Derrington, 2021). Indeed, many argue that large scale events represent high risk ventures that can impact negatively on quality of life (Fredline and Faulkner 2001; Fernandes, 2017). In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, some cities are now trying ‘*to build back better*’ and to refashion healthy visitor economies that not only enrich cities but enhance liveability for dwellers (Amsterdam and Partners, 2021). They are inspired by an awareness that tourism needs to contribute to sustainability by encouraging cultural diversity, promoting social inclusion, developing community resilience and championing environmental sustainability. There are strong calls for a ‘*new model [of] tourism management that does not depend on continual growth*’ (Fletcher, 2019, p. 532) and a widespread critical awareness of the unsustainability of exclusively privileging tourism interests (Saarinen and Wall-Reinius, 2019). In these contexts, what does the future hold for event tourism? Can policy-makers strategically use events to further tourism goals while simultaneously fostering socio-cultural benefits for all city users?

While the literature is replete with examples of cities that encouraged event tourism pre-COVID 19, there remains limited critical understanding of the outcomes of such policy decisions beyond general arguments and a widespread acceptance of the idea that event tourism contributes in mainly economic terms (Wood, 2017). It is in this context that this paper uses the case of Dublin to further understandings of the public benefits that can be leveraged through festivals and events. It focuses on Dublin because it is a medium sized city (its population is 1.43 million according to the Central Statistics Office, 2021), and like many comparable medium sized cities it has never hosted a mega event on the scale of the FIFA World Cup or the Olympic Games. The events literature has tended to overlook these kinds of cities, preferring instead to focus on large cities that host mega events. Yet events can have a strong

presence in urban policy in these medium city contexts. In addition, there is now a distinct move to acknowledge the positive roles that small and medium events can play in cities, in part because of the acknowledged risks and negativities that large-scale events pose (Jennings, 2013). However, more research on the value of small and medium events is needed (Agha and Taks, 2015). A key question addressed in this paper is whether policy-makers can strategically use small and medium events to further tourism goals while simultaneously fostering socio-cultural development more broadly. It aims to investigate, through an analysis of policy documents, the tourism objectives that Dublin city seeks to advance by supporting festivals and events and the extent to which social or cultural concerns feature in the documents. Using primary research, it further aims to investigate how a tourism-oriented festival generates benefits for a wide range of city users, not only tourists, thereby enhancing the city's social and cultural development. The paper begins with a review of relevant literature.

## **I. Tourism and events in cities**

Most cities host a wide array of events ranging from those acquired through competitive bids (often sports-focused), those created for tourism, those developed with artistic objectives and various grassroots community events (Stokes, 2008). These events may pursue different objectives but in general, festivals and events have now become '*synonymous with neo-liberal agendas and central to entrepreneurial cities' efforts to generate commerce, regenerate place and stand out on the highly competitive global stage*' (Quinn, Colombo, Lindström, McGillivray, and Smith, 2020, p. 1875). Some conclude that in the pursuit of the above, 'entire cities have transformed themselves into major stages for a continual stream of events, which can lead eventually to a 'festivalisation' of the city' (Richards and Palmer, 2010, p. 2). Public policies that use culture in this way are said to be guided by 'urban entrepreneurship' (Harvey, 1989), where culture has an economic centrality, and events are an essential commodity in the city's tourism offering (Fainstein, 2007; Featherstone, 2007). Often the events supported by cities feature sport. Sports tourism is where people '*participate in a sports activity, recreationally or competitively, travel to observe sport at grassroots or elite level, and travel to visit a sports attraction*' (Delpy-Neirotti, 2003, p. 2). As Nicolau (2021, p. 415) discusses, the profitability involved encourages cities to include sports events in their strategic plans. Indeed, events have become so integrated into the tourism offering in terms of destination rebranding, attraction development and urban regeneration that Whitford, Phi and Dredge (2014) argue that the event policy environment is now market-dominated. Wood (2017) agrees,

attesting that policy-makers are mainly interested in the economic and tourism benefits that events can yield.

In the event management literature, ‘festival tourism’ and ‘event tourism’ entered the lexicon some 20 years ago, and while there was some critical questioning of the normalcy of this pairing at the time (Quinn, 2006) for the most part, the terms were adopted and used in academia and practice without interrogation. As employed in the literature, the phrase ‘event tourism’ captures the nexus between events and tourism and has been variously defined by Getz as the ‘development and marketing of events for tourism and economic development purposes’ (Getz 2008, p. 406). In the past, event tourism was unquestioningly understood to mean large scale events and this was confirmed by Getz (2012, p. 180) who argued that ‘*within the context of an event tourism portfolio, most small events have little value—they simply cannot attract enough tourists to make them the object of industry attention*’. In urban contexts, this narrowly defined concept tended to align well with market-driven, neo-liberal approaches (Grodach, 2017) and the experience economies prevailing in cities.

As already mentioned, there is a very well-established debate on the negative impacts that large events can have on socio-cultural and environmental issues (e.g. Delamere, 2001, Coates and Wicker, 2015). Now, however, there is also growing recognition that focusing on large events has been to the detriment of smaller-scale events, those events often associated with what might be termed local values (Wood, 2017). Kelly and Fairley (2018) recently argued the usefulness of leveraging benefits from small-scale festivals. Getz and Page (2016) called for more research into understanding how festivals can bring together disparate groups like visitors and residents. Very critically, Higgins-Desbiolles (2018) argued that local communities can become erased by the event tourism gaze, preoccupied as it is with branding destinations and creating attractions that appeal to tourists. She critiques the failure of the event tourism discourse to include the community as a key pillar of event tourism and to consider the impacts of neoliberalism on the policy and planning of event tourism. By treating tourism goals in isolation from other socio-cultural policies, event tourism-inspired strategies can create tensions between tourism and cultural development (Ormerod and Wood, 2021). Historically, it can be argued that all of this thinking has been informed by dichotomous and restricted ideas of cities as destinations inhabited by locals and visited by tourists (Stors, Stoltenberg, Sommer and Frisch, 2019), but in today’s highly globalised and internationally mobile world, this kind of thinking

is misguided. Undoubtedly, more critical thinking on event tourism is needed (Jamieson and Todd, 2021).

### **Events and tourism in urban public policy**

While events have moved centre-stage in urban policy-making, it is widely agreed that many gaps in understanding about events, event tourism and policy remain (Getz, 2009, Mair and Whitford, 2013). Understandings of both event policy (Getz, 2009) and tourism policy are incomplete (Dredge and Jamal, 2015). Event policies are complex and fragmented (Getz, 2009; Maughan 2009; Whitford, Phi and Dredge, 2014), with Quinn *et al.* (2020) presenting empirical findings showing no easily discernible pattern in how policy-makers approach festivals in the five European cities that they studied. Growing momentum to develop more sustainable and more integrated approaches to policy and planning has brought fresh criticism of policy processes that operate as silos. In the tourism sphere this has been recognised as a problem by Cockburn-Wooten, McIntosh, Smith and Jefferies (2018). These authors review a number of studies calling for researchers to overcome tourism silos to open up diverse networks of knowledge and resources. From the outset it is acknowledged that trying to move towards greater policy integration is not easy (Rayner and Howlett, 2009), but integrated policy-making leads to greater awareness of how policies in one domain affect other areas, and an enhanced likelihood of these considerations being incorporated into decision-making (Lafferty and Hovden, 2003). In contrast, when policy-makers work in silos there can be a failure to appreciate what is happening in other policy domains, as well as potentials for overlooking possibilities for collaboration and for working at cross purposes. For reasons such as these, researchers like Girginov (2016) have called for policy formulation to be both collaborative and inclusive of multiple perspectives in the interest of achieving more balanced outcomes.

The future of places which host tourists is likely to be very dynamic, as cities face challenges in reducing socio-economic exclusion and accommodating increasing cohorts of immigrants, highly mobile young people, and aging populations who use cities differently than in the past. The growing critique of event and tourism policies that privilege tourism interests, consumption and play (Zukin, 1995) over the diverse needs of communities living in cities has been boosted by rapidly rising concerns about the future of the planet and the recent experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. The need for cities to find more socially sustainable developmental pathways now has an unprecedented urgency. Several cities have taken initiatives that in effect,

break down distinctions between tourists and city dwellers/users and think about socio-cultural challenges and responsibilities as distinct from solely prioritising economic growth. Cities like Amsterdam and Barcelona (Ramos and Mundet, 2021) are adapting their thinking about how tourism functions in the city, moving towards a stance which asks what tourism can do for the city rather than vice versa. All of this could encourage cities to avoid traditional inclinations to think about tourism and events in what might be referred to as ‘policy silos’, and to develop flexible tourism and event policies which speak to other agendas like social inclusion or cultural diversity. As Richards and Palmer (2010, p. 4) argue, ‘*eventfulness should not be an aim in itself, but a means of improving the city and making it more attractive and liveable*’. Similarly, Borja (2011) argues that policies which address investors, big companies, visitors and affluent locals, and aim to design public spaces prioritising tourism rather than local needs, risk creating a socially unequal city that exists largely to be consumed.

In event contexts, various researchers have long argued that festivals can ‘*promote equality, cultural diversity, inclusion, good community relations, and human rights*’ (Pernecky and Luck, 2013, p. 26), boost social interactions, and express collective belonging to a group or a place (Ekman, 1999; Quinn, 2010). Some consider them examples of ‘third spaces’, that people access in order to enjoy informal, social interactions that lead to shared experiences, common understandings, a sense of community and an improved sense of social well-being (Knox and Mayer, 2013). In general, it is argued that events can contribute to positive community development in many localities worldwide (Wallstam, Ionnides and Petterson, 2018). Nevertheless, ‘*claims like these have not yet influenced policy-making to any noticeable degree*’ (Quinn *et al.*, 2020, p. 1876). What’s more, Van der Hoeven and Hitters (2019) suggest that little is known about the policy conditions that could support the achievement of these kinds of outcomes. The remainder of the paper examines the case of Dublin which has been using events to position itself internationally for at least 25 years. The empirical study reported undertakes a detailed, critical analysis of public policy documents that relate festivals and events to tourism, and a qualitative study of festival-goers attending one of the main tourism-oriented festivals in the city. A key question addressed is whether events can be strategically used to further tourism goals while simultaneously fostering socio-cultural development.

## II. Methodology and study context

An unavailability of data makes it impossible to determine how much public funding (national or city) is invested in festivals and events in Dublin. Indeed, it is difficult to determine with accuracy the number of festivals and events annually supported by the city’s local authority, Dublin City Council (DCC), but certainly the number exceeds 100. A small number of these are also supported by Fáilte Ireland, the national tourism development authority, while others are supported by national agencies like the Arts Council and the Office of Public Works (OPW). Information on the strategic rationale for investment decisions, return on investment metrics, or evaluation data of any kind is in short supply. The policy landscape is complex, with numerous strategies, plans and policies featuring festivals and events existing at national and city levels (Quinn *et al.*, 2020).

Data for the study reported here were gathered firstly from an analysis of all of the main strategy/policy documents currently in operation, at national and city level, that specifically pay attention to both events (including festivals) and tourism (see Table 1). The content of these documents was analysed to: investigate how festivals and events are construed, valued and supported for tourism purposes; identify whether the event discourses apparent in the documents are linked in any way to social or cultural policy concerns like community development, cultural diversity and social inclusion and; identify the actions/initiatives taken to operationalise the policies.

**Table 1:** National and city policy documents which relate festivals and events to tourism

Policy document	Period	Scale	Purpose relative to Festivals and Events
Tourism Policy Framework: People, Place and Policy growing tourism to 2025	2015–2025	National	Improve tourism growth, generate revenue and promote a positive image of Ireland overseas through major festivals and events.
Creative Ireland Programme	2017 – 2022	National	Foster culture, wellbeing and creativity through artistic and cultural events.
Creative Ireland Dublin City Programme	2017 – 2022	City	Foster culture, wellbeing and creativity in Dublin through cultural-based events.
Global Ireland – Ireland’s Global Footprint to 2025	2018 – 2025	National	Expand Ireland’s global footprint and brand reputation through cultural festivals and events.
Project Ireland 2040	2018–2027	National	Invest in culture, language and heritage through cultural and commemorative events.



Tourism Action Plan	2019 – 2021	National	Attract flagship events which generate additional overseas tourism revenue.
Culture 2025	2020 – 2025	National	Provide a strong, fully inclusive, cultural base through cultural and commemorative events.
Dublin Civic Realm Strategy	2012 -	City	Develop an events culture (from major festivals to family events) in Dublin’s public spaces and improve recreational amenities in the city.
Dublin City Development Plan	2016 – 2022	City	Enhance the public domain by facilitating festivals, events.
Dublin City Council Culture Strategy	2016 – 2021	City	Position culture and creativity as central to Dublin’s global competitiveness and reputation as a modern European city.
Culture and Creative Strategy Dublin	2018 – 2022	City	Maximise opportunities for everyone to participate in Dublin’s creative and cultural life through major festivals, cultural and commemorative events.
Dublin City Council Event Strategy and Event Sponsorship Guidelines	2018 -	City	Strategy and funding guidelines for premier, major and city level events.

Source: compiled by authors

Secondly, empirical data were generated from brief on-site interviews (averaging 10 minutes in duration) with 30 people attending Stokerland, a day-time, free event staged in St. Patrick’s Park as part of the Bram Stoker Festival in 2019. The Bram Stoker Festival was established in 2012, courtesy of support from both Dublin City Council and Fáilte Ireland, the national tourism development authority. Established primarily to promote tourism, according to DCC (2019, p. 83) ‘*The Bram Stoker Festival has become a very important date in the “shoulder” tourism season, reaching the last five in the Best Festival/Event Experience at the 2019 Irish Tourism Industry Awards*’. The latest available audience figures for the festival date to 2016 when 48,000 attended, 20% of whom were from overseas (Falvey, 2017). Stokerland is intended to interest not only tourists but also anyone spending time in the city centre at Halloween.

Most of the people interviewed were Irish, aged 25 to 44 years old, living in Dublin, and with diverse occupations (e.g., software engineers, teachers, business professionals, homemakers). They mostly attended the festival with family members. Others interviewed included recently arrived city residents, mostly young, foreign couples; and, to a lesser extent, tourists from the USA, Netherlands, and the UK. Festival-goers were interviewed about their event experiences,

their reasons for attending, and their opinions about the event. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke 2006).

### **III. Events and tourism: a critical reading of public policies operating in Dublin**

Analysis of the documents listed in Table 1 reveals that the main policy discourses about events are linked to city positioning, branding and tourism, confirming as earlier discussed, the neo-liberal, entrepreneurial tendencies of contemporary cities. A priority at the national level is using events to position Dublin internationally, to build connections and ‘open doors’ in a highly competitive environment. The Global Ireland document is a case in point. Intended to ‘*implement a global communications strategy to present a unified image of Ireland as a good place in which to live, work, do business, invest and visit*’ (2018, p. 12), this strategy sees tourism as a way of broadening Ireland’s global footprint, with cultural festivals and events, in particular, being part of this. The same idea appears in Project Ireland 2040: ‘*culture is the window through which the world sees us*’ (2018, p. 6). Additionally, the idea of events as a means of sustaining social connectivity with Ireland’s extensive diaspora also features strongly in the Global Ireland document.

Not surprisingly, the Tourism Policy Framework and Tourism Action Plan are the national level documents that most clearly outline actions to develop tourism through events. Events feature to an unprecedented extent in this most recent tourism policy with international events, e.g. St. Patrick’s Festival and the Galway International Arts Festival, regional festivals and events, commemorative events, and business tourism events mentioned as key examples. Meanwhile, the Tourism Action Plan specifically notes how events have contributed significantly to the success of Irish tourism, stating that ‘*major events will continue to be an important part of the Irish tourism offering and the Government will ensure that appropriate structures and supports are in place to attract flagship events which generate additional overseas tourism revenue and contribute to the promotion of Ireland*’ (2019, p. 13).

The clear emphasis on city positioning, branding and tourism apparent in these national policy narratives is reflected in policy documents at city level. The Dublin City Development Plan (2016, p. 4), for example, shows a commitment ‘*to major events as a means to drive economic growth and help make Dublin a desirable place to live, work, play, study, invest and do business*’. The city’s Culture and Creativity Strategy refers to the existence of more than 100

festivals and events which help to attract visitors and build the city's international cultural profile. Off- and shoulder-season events including the New Year's Festival, St. Patrick's Festival, Chinese New Year Festival, Culture Night, and Bram Stoker Festival are all singled out for particular mention, with the latter being said to combine '*a focus on Dublin's literary heritage with cutting edge contemporary arts events*' (2017, p. 20). However, the Culture and Creativity strategy clearly aligns with national documents in aspiring to position Dublin globally, using events to this strategic end: '*we will continue to support international conferences and attract major events to our capital city... [and] ... to develop emerging festivals, such as New Year's Festival, which seek to position Dublin as an attractive and vibrant global destination*' (2017, p. 50). When discussing festivals, it refers to global competitiveness as a strategic priority alongside several other priorities including supporting artists and promoting cultural participation (Quinn *et al.*, 2020). DCC's (2019) annual report is another document that communicates very clearly the importance of festivals. As already discussed, it singled out the Bram Stoker Festival noting that Stokerland was a popular favourite with visitors (DCC, 2019).

The role of events as articulated through the Dublin Civic Realm Strategy (2012) and the Dublin City Development Plan is somewhat different. Animating and enhancing outdoor public spaces is a key theme here, and in this context, festivals and events like St. Patrick's Festival, are understood primarily as a means of enhancing the recreational use of public space for both visitors and residents. In consequence, upgraded and enhanced public space is understood to improve the competitiveness of the city. Thus, the Civic Realm strategy considers '*how well-connected a space is and how its design accommodates events [because] both greatly affect the suitability of the space and success of events*' (2012, p. 34). The Development Plan, meanwhile, seeks to '*promote a variety of recreational and cultural events in the city's civic spaces*' (2016, p. 57), and frequently notes the importance of upgrading parks and the public domain more generally to increase the city's capacity to stage outdoor festivals and events. It notes that '*events, as well as superior city planning, high-quality urban design, and iconic architecture, can all enhance competitive city brands*' (2016, p. 90).

Finally, the city has one dedicated, albeit brief, event strategy document (DCC Event Strategy and Event Sponsorship Guidelines) and here, Dublin is represented as an '*events city, globally renowned and locally celebrated, where citizens and visitors enjoy a year-round programme of events and festivals that celebrate our unique and vibrant culture*' (2018, p. 1). It classifies

festivals and events into three distinct categories: ‘Premier’ have large audiences – at least 10,000 attendees, capacity to achieve significant tourism outcomes, attract overseas attendees, and deliver significant local benefits; ‘Major’ attract substantial audiences – at least 5,000 attendees, deliver significant tourism outcomes and strong local benefits and ‘City level’ offer free admission, are aimed primarily at a local audience, aim to celebrate local culture, add to city vibrancy and inclusion, and can contribute to wellbeing. An unavailability of data makes it impossible to assess how national/city investment in events are distributed across these categories. The Bram Stoker Festival, of which the Stokerland event forms part, fits into the ‘Premier’ classification. These categories each have distinct eligibility and evaluation criteria for funding, and these, in turn, give an indication as to how the city values festivals and events. The first two categories (Premier and Major) refer to large-scale events with destination branding/tourism goals. The ‘City-level’ category, refers to smaller events that aspire to achieving e.g. civic pride, inclusion, community wellbeing, celebrating culture, enhancing the liveability of the city. Of note here is that the socio-cultural criteria ascribed to the City-level events are not assigned to the larger, commercial events (Premier and Major). Of note too is the relativity of scale at issue. In other cities, Dublin’s ‘Premier’ events (10,000 attendees or more) might be viewed as small or medium events.

In all of the policy discourse discussed above, local communities, residents, families, inclusion and wellbeing are mentioned, but the omnipresence of city positioning and tourism as central objectives is very strong. At city level, the clear distinctions drawn between event categories indicates a belief that tourism and branding goals are best furthered through larger events while ‘community-related’ goals are to be achieved through smaller ones. None of this is surprising. It aligns well with the fact that tourism is one of the key economic pillars for the city (DCC, 2016, p. 94 - City Development Plan), and with prevailing entrepreneurial approaches to urban planning.

#### **IV. Stokerland – an insight into a tourism event in practice**

Having discussed how the role of events is conceived in key policy documents, this section discusses a second dataset relating to an example of event tourism in practice. The Bram Stoker Festival is about *‘bringing fun and adventure to Halloween weekend to celebrate the gothic and the supernatural legacy of one of Ireland’s most treasured authors, taking his gothic novel – Dracula – as inspiration’* (Bram Stoker Festival, 2020). The festival curates a range of events

in diverse spaces across the city. As already mentioned, while it aims to attract international tourists to Dublin, it also targets locals, and fieldwork undertaken at Stokerland, found international tourists mingling alongside day trippers, city dwellers and recent immigrants.

**Figures 1 and 2:** Artists and decoration at Stokerland



Source: authors

On-site, qualitative short interviews with festival-goers asked for opinions and experiences of the event. Interviewees described the atmosphere as family-friendly, fun, happy, nice, relaxing, diverse and inclusive, supporting the suggestion that events often develop activities that encourage greater interaction and have the ability to turn places into sites of pleasure (Stevenson, 2019). This event attracted diverse cohorts, and an important theme emerging from the data was the manner in which the event encouraged a sense of inclusion. A tourist couple interviewed noticed “*people speaking different languages, from different backgrounds*” and a recently arrived immigrant said it made her “*feel more included, because the event is for everybody, you feel part of something*”. A group of young, female US visitors explained that the event “*make us feel part of the community, more a local than a tourist*”, while a man originally from the area and attending with his family, explained how his sentimental connection with the park was enhanced by the event.

**Figures 3 and 4:** Funfair and storytelling at Stokerland



Source: authors

The role of the event in fostering sociability was another key theme. Local respondents spoke positively about how events enhance public spaces, noting their accessibility and how they cultivate social interactions between visitors, tourists and locals. Some of the tourists had not known about the event in advance and, having simply come across the highly animated space, decided to spend time there. Generally, interviewees agreed that events like this enhance sociability. One local respondent spoke of seeing “*a mix of people. Tourists, visitors, locals... It is great for the socialization values and a great opportunity to gather together*”. Most of the interviewees mentioned the importance of having free events, because these can be really accessible for everybody and, in the words of one local, “*can bring people together*”. Equally, they invite casual social engagement because, as a young immigrant woman said: “*it’s not for specific people, or one specific group. It’s just pop in for a bit, and enjoy yourself*”. While the data reported here come from a very small empirical study and as such require further substantiation, they indicate support for the idea that festivals are a form of cultural intervention that can have the effect of turning everyday space into ‘convivial spaces’ (Nowicka and Vertovec, 2014), because of how they create engaging, emotional atmospheres and encourage social interactivity. Indeed, these findings align with the national Tourism Policy Framework which highlights ‘*the ability of an event to facilitate interactions between overseas visitors and local residents*’ (2019, p. 33). The informal, casual sociability that the event engenders is particularly important for people like single parents, for whom it becomes “*an opportunity to chat with other people, beside my child*”, as one single mum said. More generally, it creates a convivial atmosphere where people are prompted to converse with strangers. One local resident explained that going to events like this makes it easy to engage with other people: “*I just talked*

*to another woman because she had a dog as well [...]. There are a lot of tourists too. People can sit down, and share tables to eat...".* With the aforementioned caveat, all of these data show how *'cultural events can provide focal points for intercultural engagement'* (Richards and Palmer 2010, p. 16), including between tourists and residents, and between different types of residents. Sezer (2018) suggested that the role of public space in shaping public life is key for the socio-cultural inclusion of immigrants, offering visibility for different groups, opportunities to interact and engage with others, and a chance to express cultural values and so assert citizenship. This study suggests that staging events in public space further enhances the ability of public space to play this role. One young immigrant couple for example, mentioned how *"you can see other people and have a nice conversation"*. Another newly arrived young immigrant couple reported that they had been passing through the park, heard the music and decided to go to the event. The man attested that this kind of event was *"nice... [because] you can know the city, see other people"*, and added that *"the diversity is good, I feel that this park is inclusive"*. An immigrant couple with children said that events in public spaces are important for meeting new people of different ages and genders and also because they allow one to *"engage with different cultures, different people that you can't meet every day"*.

Several researchers point to the potential for festivals to build bonding social capital (Wilks, 2011) and the ability of Stokerland to create and strengthen connections between people was another theme in the data. Notwithstanding the modest nature of the primary data reported, they illustrate how festivals can create opportunities for nuclear and extended families to be together and e.g. for children to spend time with their grandparents. Several interviewees spoke of how social engagement of this kind can help build community. For a parent with his son, events like Stokerland can *"pull the community together. You can chat with other people and enjoy yourself while waiting for a ride on the roller coaster or at the face painting"*. A young woman said: *"when you live in the city sometimes it's difficult to form a sense of community, everyone is busy going to work, going home... and events like this can connect people with the history of the city, connect culturally and this is very important"*. For one young woman living with her family in the city centre, it is important that the City Council promotes cultural events in public spaces because it: *"is concerning to us, a lot of spaces are going towards hotels and tourism [...]. We live here too. We want stuff, we want shops, and we want nice things to walk to, to enjoy, because we want to spend time in the city"*.

**Figures 5 and 6:** Families gathering together at St. Patrick's Park



Source: authors

## **V. Re-balancing tourism event strategic thinking**

This last quote epitomises the divergence and tensions between the policy and practice identified in this paper. In essence, the strongly prevalent tourism narratives uncovered in the policy documents studied suggest an instrumental approach that uses events to achieve external approval, revenue and international standing. In sharp contrast, the Stokerland data depict an ostensibly tourism-oriented event simultaneously yielding multiple meanings and benefits for tourists and locals, families of all kinds, recent arrivals and dwellers with long established ties to the city. It reveals the human face of tourism in the guise of tourists and residents together enjoying fun, quality time in public spaces animated by quality event programming. In practice, this particular festival event aimed to generate all of these meanings. One of the managers of Stokerland explained that while the Bram Stoker Festival, of which Stokerland forms part, obviously “*aims to reach the wider market, attract visitors to Dublin, [...] it’s also an important event for the locals, to engage the community. Events in public space are important to parents, to get kids away from the TVs and phones. It’s culturally important*”. However, the holistic applied thinking apparent here is under-represented in the city’s broader strategic thinking about tourism and events.

This latter dataset, although modest, indicates support for many existing research findings with respect to the argument that festivals offer possibilities for different cohorts of people to find common ground and develop *communitas* (Wu, Li, Wood, Senaux and Dai, 2020). As cultural interventions, festivals and events create meeting places and spaces for people to actively



engage with their city, adding to the variety and composition of activities in the public zone and generate an array of varied activities' (Quinn *et al.*, 2020, p. 1878). Festivals are inherently communal, produced in and through the interactions and networking of diverse agents coming together in time-space, usually with something of a shared purpose. Accordingly, spaces are materially and cognitively reconfigured through events (Citroni and Karrholm, 2017) in ways that promote the plurality and possibilities that Massey (2005) ascribes to space. Festival spaces and places **y** can challenge and disrupt the symbolic boundaries and symbolic distinctions that serve to impede people's ability to engage (Rapošová, 2019) and help to foster dialogue between diverse groups by creating alternative structures of identification and social configuration (Kappler, 2013). The overall tenor of the literature is that festivals can generate particular kinds of sociability, social exchange and social co-existence (Pinochet-Cabos, 2019) and the findings of the Stokerland study reinforce these conclusions.

While the theoretical understanding of these matters is reflected in the applied case presented here, it is not so apparent in policy terms where an external orientation and city positioning and branding aims predominate. Some policy documents, like the Dublin City Development Plan, mention cultural inclusion and express an intention to make the city more resilient, competitive, and socially inclusive. Others, like the Culture and Creative Strategy Dublin attest that '*cultural participation encourages social engagement and inclusion and increases understanding of other cultures in our multicultural society*' (p. 27). However, these policies pay little attention to how festivals and events could actually be used to achieve cultural inclusion. Similarly, the reverse applies, as '*the municipality's funding criteria for festivals and events make it clear that 'civic pride', 'vibrancy', 'wellbeing' and 'inclusion' are eligibility criteria for community events, but these do not pertain to larger, commercial events*' (Quinn *et al.*, 2020, p. 1888). Yet the Stokerland data provide evidence that tourism-oriented events generate a breadth of values, identifiable from social, community and inclusion perspectives.

Based on the findings from the policy analysis and the empirical festival study, this paper argues that Dublin seems to overlook and under-value the potential of events to contribute to urban socio-cultural development. It supports Higgins-Desbiolles (2018) in calling for local communities to be made more visible through the event tourism lens. The findings point to the merits of normatively developing and supporting events within a holistic, integrated framework that promotes socio-cultural development and the liveability of cities, and privileges not only tourists but all city users simultaneously. In this it follows Borja, (2011) who argues that

policies which aim to design public spaces prioritising tourism rather than local needs, risk creating a socially unequal city that is more consumable than liveable.

Overall, an important question posed in this paper is whether strategic thinking about event tourism in the future could be encased in more integrated, holistic frameworks that eschew dichotomous thinking about tourists versus residents; economic development goals versus socio-cultural goals; and that appreciate more fully the potentials that well-planned events can realise for cities. Challenging prevailing ‘urban entrepreneurial’ thinking and realising such an integrated framework in any city is extremely difficult. For a start, cities may lack knowledge about the full, potential value of events. Understanding the kind of positive roles that events can play, beyond the economic ones, could enable policy-makers to pursue more integrated, strategic decision-making to achieve both tourism and community goals (Wood, 2009). *‘Having this knowledge means that these actors would be better equipped to decide on which events to subsidize, which events to bid for and which events they should discontinue’* (Wallstam *et al.*, 2018, p. 124). Currently, prevalent thinking still seems to be that only large-scale events matter when it comes to furthering tourism revenue and destination positioning goals (Getz, 2012, p. 180). At a time when cities need to urgently move towards more equitable, inclusive and resilient futures (OECD, 2020) it seems apt that cities start rethinking event scale in relative, rather than absolute, terms.

Any critical re-thinking about event tourism as a concept in policy and practice will necessarily have to analyse the complicated politics and uneven power relations associated with the staging of urban events (Johnson, Everingham and Everingham, 2020). Very importantly, as Getz (2009) strongly infers, festival policies must be read in the context of the wider urban strategies operating in their host cities. They must also be understood relative to the institutional arrangements underpinning the governance of events and the politics being played out among the key actors influencing the shape of the festival landscape (Zamanifard *et al.*, 2018). Much has been written about how festivals are produced through networks of diverse actors and stakeholders although it seems that local government is a particularly crucial stakeholder (Smith, 2012). If these key actors work in relative isolation from each other in pursuit of contrasting and possibly conflicting agendas, tensions and inefficiencies can ensue (Ormerod and Wood 2021, Girginov, 2016). For Shin and Stevens (2013, p. 629), the possibility of making festivals a public space for open communication depends on what they term *‘its politics of narratives’*. City governments, institutional frameworks and the public discourses

promulgated through urban policies, actions and practices are important influences shaping the publicness of festivals as places where positive interactivity and conviviality can be engendered. If place marketing is the dominant ideology then visitor bednights, footfall, revenue and media profile generation will be key. If, however, place-making is more central, then it's more likely that public spaces will be construed as multi-use places that can be developed for the benefits of cohorts of people that differ by age, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds (Shin and Stevens, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

This paper concludes that Dublin supports creative city thinking (d'Ovidio and Cossu, 2017) and values events very strongly for their ability to produce urban economic growth. However, as many researchers have cautioned (McLean, 2014), this approach is not always compatible with the concept of the liveable city (Southworth, 2016), it can create tensions between temporary and more permanent city residents and as these study findings have demonstrated, it can undermine the full array of possibilities that events can realise for cities.

The findings suggest that much scope exists for policy-making in Dublin to develop a more holistic policy framework. Very positively, they also show that event tourism practice in the city is being operationalised in a much more holistic manner than the analysis of policy documents might suggest, although there is a need for much more primary research in this regard. This means that policy-makers could learn a great deal from a systematic evaluation and assessment of this practice, were consultation with practitioners and wide-ranging evaluation mechanisms to be put in place.

This paper recommends that policy-makers develop strategies in a more integrated and cohesive manner, and shape tourism and event thinking in a way that accommodates cultural, social, community as well as tourism, positioning and economic perspectives. It calls for further research to understand how ambitions like these might be furthered, acknowledging the complex politics at issue. It suggests that more analysis of mid-sized events in mid-sized cities like Dublin is needed, as is more investigation into the relativity of event size and scale. Finally, more attention could be paid to the continuities/discontinuities between event tourism practice and policy, in the interest of increasing understanding of how events can address the needs of multiple city users and ensure that that the 'eventful' city fosters not only more tourism activity

but also more inclusiveness, more diversity and more opportunities for creative participation for all city users.

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