

City Officials under fire



Senior Edinburgh city officials came under fire yesterday from all sides. Plans to outsource Edinburgh's environmental services to private firm Enterprise, appeared to be scuppered by the SNP group, a coalition partner, at the council meeting last month.

At a heated public debate last night organised by the Council, Mark Turley, Director of Services for Communities recommended that the privatisation model go ahead as part of his "statutory obligation to get the best value for the city." According to Turley the move would save the city £72 million compared with £45 million of saving under the in-house model. Many of the Edinburgh residents who were present disputed this. A 90 year-old man shouted:- "Who can we trust?" and officials were even faced with questions over their own motives.

Hugh Rutherford, Chair of Edinburgh Business Forum said:- "I have sympathy for officials, when clearly they have to make extensive cuts in spending. If this is a way to produce better results we should be supporting it." But union members asked why only one side had been proposed, and Labour leader, Andrew Burns, asked about the difference in budgets between assembling the Enterprise bid and the in-house one. Edinburgh's head of e-government, Andrew Unsworth, said that the total budget for the tendering process involved in the two bids had been £3.6 million but did not outline the individual amounts spent on each.

John Sturrock QC, who was mediator at the meeting had initially called for "a spirit of collaboration" but despite several complaints about lack of communication from the floor, city leaders, LibDem Jenny Dawe, and SNP group leader, Steve

Cardownie, declined to comment or answer any questions. Security at the ticketed meeting was unusually tight, with a large police presence outnumbering the eighty or so who attended.

✘ Earlier in the day Stefan Tymkewycz, SNP councillor for Craigentiny and Duddingston suggested that a third option, that of 'Shared Services' had not been properly considered. "The SNP is, in principle, totally against privatisation." Tymkewycz said "There's been talk of alternative business models for ten years. It's time to stop talking. We have to save £90million over the next three years, and more beyond that, and at the same time maintain services."

"At the last council meeting on 27 October, I was disappointed there were only two options: privatisation or in-house. I asked officials why there wasn't a third, because I've been banging on for months about the option of shared services, for example shared vehicle fleet maintenance – Police, NHS and across public sectors, not just council services. It's my personal view that we should be looking at bringing them together. Midlothian and East Lothian are sharing education services for example," said Tymkewycz.

"This could be a U-turn from the SNP," said Alyson Macdonald of the 'Save Our Services: Edinburgh Against Privatisation' campaign, one of many campaign groups across the capital who have formed in response to the plans. "They're looking at the council elections next year. I think somebody's had a word from above in their ear about not voting for something that's THAT unpopular 6 months before an election."

Macdonald was also critical of the council's communication. "Why are they limiting attendance at public meetings? Some neighbourhood partnership meetings don't take place till after the vote. The secrecy has been pretty frightening."


After criticism from AuditScotland, the council did commission

a MORI public consultation report, the results of which are kept under lock and key. Nobody can see it without signing a secrecy agreement.

Peter Hunter, UNISON organiser in Edinburgh has seen the MORI focus group report, but was unable to talk about the results due to the confidentiality clause. "It's just opinion" he told us, "people do seem to be opposed to privatisation."

Unison has recently put a Freedom of Information request in about the report. At the public meeting last night a clearly emotional Hunter said:- "Questions tonight have been unanswered. If jobs go, there will be trouble. Just don't go there."

Macdonald admits she's unable to envisage voting for one of the main political parties again. "Labour has on the whole come out saying they're against privatisation. It's rubbish, because they're trying to bring in similar things in other councils. And they were responsible for all the PFI, the trams and everything else."

[On our live blog last week](#) Andrew Burns conceded that the  party may have lost trust among Edinburgh voters:- "I'm not going to pretend that generally regaining trust (politically) is ever easy. I do hope that our actions (not just our words) over the last 5-years have demonstrated our views." he said.

The Alternative Business Model option may include privatisation of most of Edinburgh's services. The environmental services including waste management, rubbish collection, recycling and parks will be voted on at the full council meeting on Thursday 24 November 2011. Integrated facilities management including building maintenance, cleaners and school lunches, and corporate and transaction services including HR, council tax collection and benefits are also due to be considered.

Sue Bruce, Edinburgh's chief executive said:- "Our assessment

is not an emotional or political decision. Whatever the council decides, we will implement. Answers to all questions raised at the public meeting will be posted [on the council website](#) before the next Council meeting.”