

Edinburgh Councillor blogs – Councillor Gavin Corbett on privatisation

Green Finance spokesperson Gavin Corbett laments the [revival of proposals](#) to privatise management of council facilities.

It's about haggis, isn't it?

Five years ago, before I became a councillor, the city council was on the cusp of handing over the running of schools, community centres, offices, depots and so on to the private sector. The preferred provider was MITIE.

At the eleventh hour, the council stepped back from the brink and decided to proceed with an internal improvement programme which sought to address some pretty significant service weaknesses.

By all accounts the internal improvement programme has not had its troubles to seek. Costs are higher than expected and there remains a backlog of repairs and improvements to public buildings.

So something needs to be done.

✘ Is that “something” the transfer of the running of public buildings to the private sector? Mega-consultants Deloitte seem to think so, having been commissioned by the council to look at options for an asset and property management strategy. Having reviewed the options, surprise, surprise, it has concluded that engaging an “[enterprise wide strategic partner](#)” should be the preferred option. That is privatisation to you and me.

That means that the running of offices, depots, schools, libraries, community centres would be handed to the private

sector. While the building themselves would remain in public ownership the building-related staff – that is janitors, cleaners, receptionists, caretakers etc – would be transferred to private providers, such as the aforementioned MITIE.

Having read the business case in full I believe that this recommendation is deeply flawed and rests on assumptions for cost-savings that would be difficult to realise and damaging for services.

However, for now, I want to pick out just one area, that of customer service. We want our public buildings to be accessible and welcoming places. Take schools, for example. We want our schools to be community assets 7 days a week, from 8am to 10pm. I spoke to one parent council chair at a school, which, as a PPP school, already has MITIE as the service provider. She was utterly scathing about how poor the service has been. She spoke of endless bureaucracy to get a simple let, of taking months to negotiate a school event, of having to fill out a form to move a table from one room to the next, of never being able to speak to anyone in the company who could make a decision. Asked to compare the customer service of another non-PPP school with the the PPP school, she gave the former 9 out of 10, the latter 2 out of 10.

And haggis is a problem. The school hosted a Burns Supper for which the parents had to go to herculean lengths to get the haggis sorted. In Scotland. At a Burns supper.

Maybe she's just been plain unlucky but, for her, in customer service terms, private companies running schools has been a shocking deterioration.

What is the answer? It is staring us in the face, as usual. If the running of public buildings as a public service still has a way to go in relation to improvements, then let's commit to those improvements, support the staff, provide real leadership, co-source some of the change, if need be.

But let's banish the shadow of privatisation for good.