

The Edinburgh Reporter chats with the Council Leader

Adam McVey is the youngest ever council leader in Edinburgh. He took up his post about a month or so after the council elections when a coalition deal was struck with the Labour group at the City Chambers. So who is he?

He celebrated his 30th birthday in May and is the SNP group leader, the fourth since the last administration took office in 2012, which makes him the council leader too. He was Vice Convener of Transport and Environment in the last administration, but was only elected as a councillor in 2012 so this has been a real rise to prominence for him.



Adam McVey Council Leader

We met Cllr McVey at the City Chambers to have a chat about him, though it has to be said that he maintains a low profile when it comes to his private life! We know that he lives in Leith, he gets a bus quite often and he is passionate about the environment, so what else did we glean from him?

He began: "I'm a Paisley buddy by birth and origin. I came to Edinburgh via Dundee as I went to university there. I came to Edinburgh to do a post grad in law after studying economics in Dundee.

"I then spent three years working for the Fringe here, I worked for Amnesty International, worked for a social investment charity and an accountancy firm here so most of my working life has been spent in the capital."

So when people question your experience what should they know about? "I hope that people in the city look at what I have actually done, not just before politics but in the last five

years in the council. I got through some pretty big policy changes like 20mph, significant investment in cycling projects and delivered the 10% budget allocation on cycling through to competition from a start of 5% in 2012 to 10% in 2017.”

So what you are talking about is the fact that the council now spends 10% of its transport budget on cycling infrastructure in the city – and you are a cyclist?

“I am a cyclist and a bus user and a car driver and a pedestrian, not necessarily in that order, but probably a bus user and a pedestrian more than anything else!

“It’s important to transform the way that we look at transport in the city. We have a growing city with limited road space. We are a historic city so we can’t do what Glasgow did decades ago and build a motorway right through the centre. We have to think differently and Glasgow are actually starting to think along the same lines as Edinburgh. My experience before politics and hopefully during it has give me a good steading into how to take the city forward.

So Adam is a cyclist, economist and qualified in law but not necessarily wanting to be a lawyer first.

“I am an economist at heart. When I did my law degree about a third of the law course was international tax law, another third trade and investment law and the remaining third on environmental law.”

How do you manage to give yourself some free space and time?

“Free time now and for the last two years has been a lot of painting because I bought a house that needed done up literally top to bottom. So the last two years has been a lot of sanding and varnishing of floors.

“I am often putting on another coat of paint in my kitchen! It is a never ending struggle. But apart from that I run quite a

bit, and I go to the cinema often too.”

With five years as a councillor already under his belt Adam is clearly now a politician. So how did he settle on the SNP in the first place?

“When I was about 16, like a lot of 16 year-olds I was watching TV as Tony Blair was taking us into an illegal war. I saw a world that I thought needed to be improved, and I saw the SNP as a natural vehicle for that.

“For me it was about international stuff as much as it was about Scotland and what was happening on my street and around me. I am from a working class street on a housing estate in the west of the country. I was never surrounded by the kind of privilege that a lot of people have here and that drives me forward not in a self-interested way because I think I have done okay to have two degrees and relatively good prospects but so many people I knew at school didn't have that opportunity. So there was a lot of motivation that came from my personal experience and what was around me in my friends and school friends.

“A lot of it came from looking at my TV screen and this thing called the UK that was doing absolutely abysmal things on the international stage – and still is.

“It is still selling arms to horrendous countries. It is still doing things like with one hand promoting human rights and completely undermining them with a whole host of actions. For me it is about what is going on on the streets here and what is going on on the international stage, and the thing that we call the UK and what we are doing. That is what pushed me even at 16 to the SNP.”

Now in light of the EU Referendum and the recent General Election the SNP leader has apparently put independence on the back burner. Does that concern you? Do you feel cheated by that?

“I would want independence under any circumstances because I am an SNP member, but there is a big job to do and particularly here in the city.

“If my main one motivation in life was independence then I would have joined the SNP and never stood to be elected for office. I would never have got involved beyond campaigning for other candidates. The one thing I would want them to say is independence, independence, independence. I never saw myself in that. There are areas of policy that I have disagreed with the party on. I have worked hard on the internal structure of the party to try and change. I am not a dyed in the wool do what ever because the party wants independence as its goal. There’s a whole host of things that matter to me like human rights.

“We have done some fantastic things as a party like equal marriage, but in saying that we were in office for quite a while before we delivered it. So sometimes I think it is about being a member and not just looking at independence as the only thing that is driving us, but looking at the policy changes that we think are important and pushing them forward to get there at some point eventually and to get there quicker because sometimes the party could be on a bit of a journey to get there as it was on equal marriage.

“Independence for me is one policy that I think will drive a lot of social change and a lot of positive change globally as well. That is one thing amongst a whole host of things.

“If someone asked me to describe myself politically in 10 or 20 words then I don’t think nationalist would be among them. It would be socialist, internationalist, liberal, republican. It would be a whole host of things that I would describe myself as before I would describe myself as a nationalist.

“So there are many things that I want to see Scotland changed to become.

So what is the relationship between the Council Leader and the Scottish Government at Holyrood. Are you now Mr Important?

“I never feel like Mr Important! Anyone who does probably needs to give themselves a good slap! Hopefully I am building a strong relationship with Ministers, with special advisers and civil servants at Holyrood to make sure that they are in a good position to stand up for Edinburgh, to make sure that Edinburgh’s agenda is front and centre of their minds and that the things that we want to deliver in the next five years are facilitated by Holyrood as best as possible.

“We are literally a ten minute walk from parliament. It is downhill so the walk there is easier than the walk back up! Or it’s five minutes on the bus so we have to take advantage of that. We have enormous access to cabinet secretaries and ministers at every level and we need to make sure that where our agenda can be promoted we are taking those opportunities.

“I found in the first couple of months in this role that the government was very receptive to meetings to discussions about a whole host of things which means we can take our agenda forward.

During the last administration there were several SNP group leaders at the City Chambers with Councillor Steve Cardownie, Sandy Howat, Frank Ross all taking the helm ahead of Councillor McVey who took over the leadership at the AGM held after the May council elections. So with almost as many leaders as years in the Capital Coalition administration since 2012 will Councillor McVey last the course? We asked him the question as to whether he felt that he has the backing of his political group and whether he is likely to remain leader for five years.

“I am confident that I have the backing of my political group, but I realise that I am the fourth SNP Group leader in four years. You could say that my coat is on the shooogliest peg of

all, which I don't think is necessarily a bad thing. Politics is about democracy, it's about challenge, it's about making sure that the right people are doing the right job.

"If there is anyone who can do a better job than me then in the interests of the party and in the interest of the city then I would hope they would challenge me, and I would hope they would win!

"I am going to try to do the best job I can, and you do it for as long as people want you to do that job, but as soon as people are sick of the sight of you then it is probably time to move on and do something else."

What are your priorities in setting the agenda for the minority coalition?

"I think the biggest thing we will do that people will look back on in ten or twenty years is build the biggest rollout of social housing that this city has ever seen in such a condensed period of time. We have a need to do that because our city is growing at such an exponential rate.

Councillor McVey explained to The Edinburgh Reporter that he knows from friends how much the rental in the city is increasing. He continued : "There is rampant inflation in our city because of the housing shortage. If we can put a massive injection in the number of social and affordable housing I think it is going to affect the market in a very positive way. Then landlords will not be able to increase the rent so much just as a matter of course every year or every two years.

"So I think when people look back the biggest thing that we will hopefully have achieved is delivering an absolute seismic shift in the number of affordable homes."

There was already an announcement made [during the last administration](#) that there would be 16,000 affordable homes built in the city in the next ten years, but now there will be

20,000 new homes over the same ten year period.



January 2016 Council/Housing Association
pledge on affordable housing

Adam explained : “We have set a mid-point marker of 10,000 homes in the next five years which is more than we were planning for. Being totally honest that is a going to be a big challenge to hit. I think hitting the 20,000 over 10 years is doable, is manageable but looking at the midway point it’s going to be really difficult to deliver 50% of them just because of the nature of the way these developments come about. The lead-in time for these is so long that it will be easier to deliver in years 6,7 and 8 for example than years 1,2 and 3.

“8,000 homes are already identified in terms of site and are on stream in some way or another. The land is secured and some will be in North Edinburgh, some in the south-east of the city. They are fairly spread across the city and in some cases construction is already happening.

“We’ve got a wee bit more to go before we hit that 10,000 and then a bit more to go to ensure that our on-stream continues into the next administration so that they can deliver another 10,000 on top of what we will do in this one in the next five years.”



People are complaining about rubbish quite a lot. As Vice-Convener of Transport and Environment in the last administration Councillor McVey is used to emails about this topic. We asked if it was still a priority.

“It is still not far from my intray! There are probably more people who email me about it now – as they should. When you have a service that should run like clockwork day in day out,

having service failures whether because someone has inconsiderately parked at the end of a street and blocked the way for the bin lorry or if it is something to do with a bin just being missed, or on-street litter bins that are not collected fully, we have ways of addressing these issues.

“We should be running these core services day in day out like a Swiss clock. We are not quite there yet. I think in the last administration we acknowledged that we weren’t quite there, and that’s why we came up with a 65 point action plan to try and address fly-tipping, on-street litter bins, communal recycling and individual recycling. We took a good look at it in November last year, so that is a year old and a lot of those action points have been delivered.

“I have a little bellwether site in my ward where people always dump something. It is the worst place you can dump something as it is penned in by railings. For people actually going in to collect it it is the worst possible location. But that has become hugely better. So my bellwether that I pass every day has got better because the crews who are out seeing the same thing every day are reporting back, and things are being dealt with in a much quicker timeframe.

“We need to make sure that the other 64 action points on that plan are being implemented as effectively. We are trying to make sure that we don’t miss a beat between the last administration and this and build toward a conclusion where people have confidence in our service again.

“There’s always going to be a bin somewhere which is overflowing. Someone only has to put a massive box in a litter bin which then half-fills it and then it will be overflowing in no time at all. People will do that kind of thing.

“We have had enormous success with our Trade Waste team going into communal bins and working out which businesses were filling it up. There was one bin and one business in my ward

which got done multiple times. They just wouldn't learn their lesson. It was a £200 fine each time so at least we made a bit of money out of it!

"That took the officers to literally take the communal bin tip it at Powderhall, go through it in detail and work out that something like 50% of that waste should not be in there in the first place.

"So as well as the council trying to keep its side of the bargain trying to sort out these services and make sure they are running absolutely like clockwork we have a big job to make sure that businesses and people are using the services that we are putting out responsibly.

"People talk about German cities as the perfect example. People don't treat their communal bins like they would in Germany where businesses would not fly tip in them. People don't put buggies and other bulky disposable items in their local litter bin. People elsewhere just don't do that. So if we can get to a point where we are all using these services responsibly and the council is meeting its side of the bargain then we will finally get to the point where people in Munich will go home and say that they would like the service that we have in Edinburgh."



We asked the Council Leader if this was the job he had always wanted. He was quite frank when he answered : "Well, no I think it would be fair to say no! Even in the last administration with my background I would probably see Economic Development as the area where I would be most experienced and where my skill base lends itself to.

"But everyone in the SNP and Labour group who are part of the administration has a role to play in the administration and the running of the city. When you look at the plethora of skills people have everyone comes in with a completely

different and unique set of experiences and circumstances and vantage point ‘

“And that is hugely useful regardless of what job you are doing. So even if I was a backbencher in the SNP I would hope that openly would still be using my skills and experience to try and further what we are all trying to deliver in the next five years.”



Councillors McVey and Day sign the new coalition agreement a month after the Council elections.

Looking back over the past six months what is he most pleased about?

“I am actually pleased with everything. We have a programme that has been approved by the council, despite the fact that it took us about seven weeks after the election to form an administration. This month we will get details of how those pledges and wider outcomes are going to be measured, what we define success as, and how we are going to make sure we can track whether we are achieving against that.

“There’s loads of things specifically on our programme that we have already delivered. We have done a huge amount of work trying to build momentum towards the 20,000 homes that we need to build. City Deal has been a huge part of that, but there are other more individual actions being taken as well.

“We’ve established now – and it is fully formed – our Homelessness Task Force and that’s going to try and draw key service areas together, key points of information, and particularly key service users. We are trying to make sure that we get it right, because right now we are spending millions of pounds in the city on outcomes and services that are not delivering what they should for those people who really need that safety net. So we have to restructure it, we

have to put more emphasis on prevention. We have to recognise the challenges that our housing market is causing for people.

“Homeless charity Shelter are quite vocal about the fact that the number of people from private lets now presenting as homeless is increasing at a very high rate. We need to understand these issues, get into them and try to find action points and address them so that people not only when they find themselves in a position of homelessness can get the service and advice they need, but also way in advance of that people will have access to the information they need to try and make sure that homelessness does not occur in the first place.

“I am doing the [Sleep in the Park](#) in December and I would love people to support me on [Virgin Money Giving!](#)

“I think this will be helpful. What we are working on now with Josh Littlejohn is making sure that it is not just an event that happens after which people feel good about themselves.

“I want to take that goodwill, the involvement of key organisations and crucially we take the money that is raised through that process to find a solution that makes a real difference.

“If we can actually use that money in conjunction with housing associations, council and everything else to try and make sure that we make big inroads into the problem then with that additional one-off level of resource the council’s resources will be freed up.

“The council can then focus on more intervention, and early intervention, and preventative measures that might help us avoid people getting into that situation in the first place.

“We are now working closely with Josh and other key partners to make sure that we do this in a meaningful way.”