

# Council in coalition – dealing with homelessness and housing

It is now one year since the SNP and Labour groups on the City of Edinburgh Council were finally able to put the ink on their coalition agreement. With enough numbers to form the council, neither group has a majority either alone or together.



Council Leader Adam McVey and Depute Council Leader Cammy Day marking one year in coalition

When first elected the SNP group was the biggest group with 19 councillors, although its numbers have now reduced with two elected members becoming Independent during the year.

The Conservatives had, and still have, 18 councillors and the Labour Group 12. There are 63 elected members at the City Chambers, so arithmetic is key to getting agreement on any policies.

So after their first year of five how are the council doing?

The Council Leader is keen to point out many of the achievements of the last year, but is equally frank about those not yet achieved.

The joint business plan has [52 commitments](#) in it. The measure of the council and how it is running the city is rather more than just box ticking against each of those, but they are at least a guide.

Here in the first part of a series of interviews we discuss with Cllrs McVey and Day the matter of homelessness and what they are doing about it. These are two commitments which, although separate, are interconnected.

**Commitment 1 : to deliver a programme to build at least 10,000 social and affordable homes over the next 5 years, with a plan to build 20,000 by 2027.**

According to its [most recent figures](#), the council has around 1300 homes completed or under construction. There are 1500 more which have planning approval and there are around 2,200 affordable homes under construction on over 30 sites across Edinburgh.

**Commitment 9 : to create a Homeless Task Force to investigate the growing homelessness problem in the city. The team will review the use of bed and breakfast premises and explore alternatives that better meet the needs of individuals and families with an aim to end the use of bed and breakfast facilities. Appoint a Homelessness Champion who will chair the Task Force.**

Tackling homelessness is a key priority for the council. Both councillors slept out at the Sleep in the Park in December when Josh Littlejohn's charity Social Bite organised a fundraising event which raised around £4 million to tackle homelessness in Scotland.

Councillor McVey tweeted a report at 6.30am after sleeping out

all night, and commented on 'surviving' the night in sub-zero temperatures in Princes Street Gardens. He said then that this was how many homeless people felt, that they were just surviving and not living their lives. He assured everyone that the emphasis would be to make sure that the council builds enough houses with enough support systems to allow people to do more than just get by.

The Council Leader said to The Edinburgh Reporter : "This has been a flagship matter for us. It is not just about affordable housing and homelessness though. It is about understanding the entire picture. We understand that the rampant inflation in our housing market is causing huge challenges for people to get on the housing ladder, and huge challenges for people in rented accommodation where rents rise.

"We have explored rent controls, but we have also tackled the supply of affordable homes, bringing short term B&B and purpose bought Air BnB back into residential use. All these will make a real difference.

"The difficulty for us is that there are now hundreds of houses which were once residential, but which are now let out on a short term basis. It is the regulations which have allowed that to happen. Our Short Term lets working group has already reported recommendations, and we are now writing to the government to work with them to build a regulatory framework to allow us to tackle the problem.

"By looking at the issue in the round, I think we can make real inroads. We can't make progress on homelessness without making progress on housing supply. We will never tackle the inflation in the housing market in Edinburgh without looking at all the components that are driving that up."

Councillor Day who was Housing Convener in the last administration added : "We have a growing successful city, but we accept that as it grows there's need for more housing, more

accessible transport, more active travel and all of these parts are huge challenges. We want to extend the tram, introduce more cycling opportunities, and opportunities for people to walk across the city.

“Buying up the National Grid site at the Waterfront, getting on with India Quay and looking to get key sites across the city and extend our count of affordable homes. We share these aims. Our coalition agreement states that we will deliver more affordable homes.”



Councillor Day is councillor for Forth Ward and the [Social Bite Village](#) is sited there. This village created from Tiny Houses is a housing solution with support from other agencies built in. Cyrenians are involved and residents have to fit certain criteria to live there as it is a community not just a housing solution.

Cammy is careful to explain that this might only be a temporary arrangement. (The charity has a lease of the land owned by the council for an initial five years.) He said : “These are temporary homes which can be removed – perhaps when it becomes a permanent site for people to live. We welcome initiatives like that. Our Homelessness Task Force have looked

at a whole range of things and taken evidence from a whole range of professionals including people who have experienced homelessness.

“Working with Josh and Social Bite has just been one part of that. But we and Josh all agree that these are only temporary solutions. The end solution is that you will be in a permanent home, but these initiatives help manage the situation.

“We should not forget that the council alone spends tens of millions of pounds on homelessness, investing in housing and support alongside that with other agencies as well.” Councillor Day agreed that the aim was to move away from this kind of spending however.

He concluded : “The number one priority of the Task Force is to end B&B accommodation for families and that is exactly what they will report back on.”



Josh Littlejohn MBE speaking at the opening of the Social Bite Village.

Councillor McVey said that there is a very positive reason for Social Bite being sited where it is, and that is that there is a lot of potential in the area for a lot of new development. He said : “It is not the only site that will be sought after

in itself. There is a huge scope to deliver a huge amount of affordable homes there. That is what the city needs and it is what the Waterfront can deliver.”



The official opening of Social Bite Village