

Sarah Boyack MSP – glad to be back at Holyrood

Sarah Boyack was first elected at the very beginning of The Scottish Parliament, then she lost her seat but has now come back ready to deal with housing and planning matters which is where her specialism lies.

She was formerly Minister for Transport and Environment and then Minister for Transport and Planning introducing one of Scottish Labour's best known policies – free travel for those over 60. She has represented both the Edinburgh Central constituency and has been a list MSP. She is now spokesperson for Communities and Local Government.

Sarah spoke to us during a busy day at Holyrood a few weeks ago after which we had to leave the interview to the side while the General Election campaign diverted our attention.

She explained she is ready for the new challenge.



Sarah Boyack MSP PHOTO ©2019 The Edinburgh Reporter

What were you doing whilst you were away first of all?

“Well, the first few months, I went in and started working at Heriot-Watt University where I used to be a lecturer before I got elected in 1999. I taught town planning students architects chartered surveyors building engineers. And what really struck me was how far things have moved on in terms of young people’s awareness of climate change, and how we re-engineer our towns and cities so I did that up until the April of 2017.

“And then I got a job with The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, which was fantastic because for somebody who has campaigned for affordable housing for all my adult life to be able to go in and lobby for that was great.

“And the way I describe it as when I was in the parliament first off, I used to get complaints and used to deal with constituents’ issues going directly to housing associations or private landlords or the council, then I got to see the best

of housing associations for two and a half years. And now I'm back – I'm back dealing with where things have gone wrong, antisocial behaviour, getting people the right tenancy or accessible housing. So it's a really useful experience to have.

"And I kind of feel I'm back in the thick of it now back in the parliament."

So how is it to be back? Are there things that you perhaps had started before that you're picking up on or is it all new stuff.

"In some ways, this place feels different, because there are more parliamentary questions to Ministers that the Presiding Officer has initiated. That's good. I would say what what I worked on before I left I was working on a Member's Bill on the Tourism levy. So that is a tick in the box! It is centre stage.

"I'm getting to work on that issue again, on the local government committee. I would say one of the things I've come back to is the issue of homelessness, and the issue of people getting access to NHS treatment. So right through, everybody focuses rightly on the problems in hospitals, particularly the Sick Kids, and the huge delays and the problems and the overruns there in terms of cost. But getting access to GPS, getting support for social care, getting the care people need on mental health, particularly for children. Those issues have been centre stage the last few weeks in terms of the issues people are bringing up to me, in terms of casework."

How do you feel that, you know, The Scottish Parliament here works with the local council? Do you think that's a good merge?

"What I've been trying to do in the last few weeks is make sure that the voice of Edinburgh residents and the challenges the council faces are actually heard in parliament. Because I

do feel certainly since the SNP took over the leadership, that there's been less upfront challenge or request for resource.

"So things like housing, things like social care or health and social care agenda, Some really good stuff I've been working with Cammy Day – that's Councillor Cammy Day the Deputy Leader of Edinburgh Council – and the work he's doing on poverty reduction is fantastic.

"But as you say, these are long term issues. So for me short term, it would be health and social care and funding.

"Councils are underfunded, and we've got a particular problem in Edinburgh, which is that we are not just short of affordable housing – and by affordable housing I obviously mean social housing, whether it's council or coop or housing association, but the cost of private rent is just increasing because it's a rationing process.

"So is the cost of housing to buy, and I know people, particularly young families, who would historically have lived in Edinburgh, they went to university here they've had kids that have moved out to Fife. So they live in areas like Dunfermline a lot of people who used to live in Edinburgh. But you can see the same thing in West Lothian in Midlothian.

"The greenbelt around Edinburgh is under massive pressure. So that issue of losing properties so a long time ago we'd be losing to bed and breakfast or hotels for whole units in the city centre. So maybe 10 flats would all go into one hotel. Now what we've got is Airbnb. And when I say Airbnb, it's short term lets in general, there's lots of different providers, but it's a major problem for us."

But was this one of the things that you did whilst you were an MSP before I seem to remember it was you know Sarah Boyack and party flats were all the words ran together.

"Interestingly, I have not had so many party flats issues. But

the issues will one of the issues I worked on when I was away before I got my last job was I worked on the law of tenement issues with a group of people coming together to look at how can we ensure that flats actually get the repairs they need.

“So short term lets can be an issue. In the stair it can be a can be either a litter or an anti social behaviour issue or even somebody just being noisy and smoking in your stair. One of the things that three and a half years old is obvious as a lot of stairs have got key boxes outside. It’s a bit of a giveaway and that really tells you that that property is rented out.

“In some areas it can actually be because an older person has a carer coming to look after them. But mostly in the city centre. we’re talking flats that are rented out.

“So I would say that’s accelerated since I left the parliament. So I’m going to have to redouble efforts on the amount of housing that’s available, a much tougher look at how many properties are not actually available to Edinburgh residents anymore.

“And as a capital city, that’s got a tourism industry it’s not about choosing between the two – it’s about getting a balance.”

When is the Scottish government going to decide on the tourism levy?

“Well, that’s something I’ve asked questions about since I’ve arrived back, I am absolutely convinced has to be in place before the next Scottish Parliament elections. There’s one or two bits of legislation that I think are important. There’s that, then there’s something called compulsory sale orders, which is another tool in the box for land reform.

“In the last parliament, we enabled communities to get access to properties that weren’t being used or have been left

derelict and vacant. So you're beginning to see communities come through."

So a wee bit like a community buyout then?

"Yes we had that in the rural areas of Scotland. But in the last parliament, just three years ago, we extended that to urban areas. So people are beginning to use that opportunity. But there's also, there's some parts of Edinburgh where you've just got vacant properties and people are waiting for something to happen so that they can make money on the property. And that brings down an area, but it's also a missed opportunity in terms of housing."

But then that that completely is completely at odds with using greenbelt land for housing. You would think that you would just use what's there first but of course that is the more expensive route?

"Sometimes it can be more expensive, especially if you're dealing with an area that's had properties in it that has to be cleared. And one of the things that we've seen in the north of the city is quite big redevelopments around the Granton area. So there is development taking place, and you can have relatively dense housing that is of high quality."

There are some lovely houses just round the back of Pennywell shops, there's some beautiful housing there.

"Yes there's some really good housing going up. One of the bits of unfinished business actually is that I think that where somebody applies for planning permission for a vacant site or for a piece of agricultural land, the value rockets, because it's been given planning permission, that then makes it more expensive for people to buy the land for housing or for development, you've still got infrastructure, then you've got schools. So it's something called land value capture. So as a former time planner, some am quite interested that we appreciate this parliament."

So what would you like to happen with that you'd like even though the land has planning permission, you would like it, not to go up in value?

"No what would happen is – the land is there Somebody puts it up for planning permission it gets planning permission, the value of the land rockets, so the local authority would get some of that back, you wouldn't get all of that profit, but it would get a contribution and that would help with the affordability of putting up new infrastructure, which is something that other Edinburgh taxpayers currently pay for, so I think it'd be something good for our city.

I suppose the other way that that can be paid for those through the section 75 agreements, which the developer has to enter into with the local authority so that they actually then say, Yes, we'll put up a local primary school or something like that? All too often, though. They're not, not desperately well enforced –

No so again, this comes back to local authorities having the cash to do what we need to do.

"We need good quality planning, not cutting back to the bare bones. So, for me a lot of unfinished business and it has been a real privilege. Get to campaign on those issues again.

We asked Sarah about the shocking news of Gorgie City farm which went into liquidation in autumn 2019

"Out of the blue and Gorgie City Farm – it's an institution and the era but it's been an immense support for many, many families over the years. For local residents, it's a calm space, to go and visit the animals. See the pets. The experience of having that kind of quality urban area and the biodiversity it brings is something people really value in Gorgie, but it's a wider benefit to the community. So the absolute need is to get the council to pull people together and make sure that the land is protected, that it's saved, and

that it is still used for that type of use. So a community facility, but also one that's very much about our local environment."

So it's busy now that you're back here in Holyrood?

"It's been phenomenally busy. And the first couple of months, I didn't have any parliamentary staff, because the process advertising for staff and recruitment is not instant.

"So we are fully staffed now so there's so much to do and those issues of health and access to mental health and young kids waiting months for getting access to support, it's just not good enough. And things like the Sick Kids hospital, we campaigned to get it – the fact that it's years late, over budget £1.4 million a month for a hospital that's empty. And I've had lots of parents getting in touch, some of whom were devastated because they'd expected their kids to be moving in the summer. And it was literally a day's notice I think that people found out they couldn't move.

"It feels that it is very much the real day to day issues that are not resolved. And for me, the opportunity of being back here is to push for the things that people need in Edinburgh."