

#SP2021 – Ash Denham MSP

Ash Denham is the SNP MSP for Edinburgh Eastern, and having only been elected for the first time in 2016 she has risen to become Minister for Community Safety in Nicola Sturgeon's cabinet. She is the SNP candidate for Edinburgh Eastern in the May election.

She describes the portfolio as “quite a technical brief and it can be a bit dry”, but it is clear that she has gone about it with great gusto. She says it is a mixed bag and while it includes legislation which some people probably don't know about, there have also been some fairly notable changes to the law.

In particular, she said is pleased that the law of defamation has been modernised “which was long overdue” as it had not been substantively changed since the nineties.



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She said: “Obviously the way we communicate now with social media and the internet has changed a lot. I think this rebalanced the law slightly in favour of freedom of expression.”

In addition she worked on the Children (Scotland) Act which deals with family courts and family law, and again she thought was in need of some updating. This was a piece of legislation which took two years to put in place.

Ms Denham said: "I really looked at the policy and really tried to think about how it would impact on people because this is going to be in place for a long time."

The final piece of law which she chose to highlight during our interview is the new regime around fireworks. This legislation ticks the boxes of helping Ms Denham's own constituents as well as people all over Scotland.

In 2017 there were many problems with fireworks in Craighentony following which Ms Denham organised a public meeting in her constituency with representatives from the police and fire service as well as local councillors. Around 16,000 people responded to the subsequent consultation. Ash said: "It really touched a nerve across Scotland, and I think there was this acceptance, this changing mood of the public, that they were just sick to the back teeth with, people using fireworks in anti-social ways."

In the wake of Grenfell and the fire there in a high rise block, Ash has worked on determining what the effect of that is in Scotland, and how the government could make high rises safer for people living in them. She helped to design a leaflet which went to every high rise building in Scotland, explaining that each house is like a fireproof box, and offering advice on safety in the event of fire and what to do to keep safe.

In addition the Holyrood Public Audit Committee discussed attacks by dogs, and are considering the law on this to see whether it needs changed. Ash said she thinks it probably does. She said: "We just did an awareness raising campaign about how to keep your dog under control, how to know if it's out of control, and what to do if you see a dog that's out of control. The idea is that it's meant to be sort of a preventative regime, with dog control notices just to stop them getting out of control, and then maybe going on to bite someone."

Ms Denham previously worked for the think tank, Common Weal – “not your average think tank”. She said she is well used to considering matters by realising that nothing needs to stay the same just because that is how they have always been done and has brought that to her work as an MSP. She feels that her experience working there helped her to become a better communicator and learn how to put policy ideas into more easily understood language as a result.

Her observation on parliamentary procedure is that it has been a good thing to introduce remote voting to parliament, but she hopes that it will be improved upon to allow some working from home.

As for her work in the constituency, she has tried hard to let people tell her what they wanted. She said: “A couple of examples were on funding allocation. I had to go to councillors using the Index of Multiple Deprivation and made the point that it is good to put the money into areas where it is really needed. In doing so I was able to protect funding for some of the third sector organisations in my constituency like The Venchie, and Goodtrees and Moredun. One of the other things I did was help the housing estate at The Wisp where there was no internet for ages. It did involve sitting looking at the actual cabinet with the fibre in it and trying to figure it out. We eventually did and now the estate has usable internet which they didn’t have before.”

Ms Denham is positive that Covid and the recovery from it will be the big issue in the next parliamentary session. She will also focus on getting people back to work and looking after them and their mental health.

At university Ash used to sing jazz with a band, and although she has not done much singing since then, she entertained the Craigentenny SNP branch in 2019 with a Burns song. She is considering joining a choir if time allows, recognising all too well what the mental health issues of living on your own

are and how singing might help.

With such a wide range of interests she might be hard pushed to find that if she is re-elected on 6 May.