

The Big Interview – Cllr Scott Arthur on a new approach to dealing with bins and potholes

Transport matters have been the talk of the steamie in Edinburgh for many years, but particularly during the pandemic when Spaces for People measures were introduced in many areas of the city. These were not universally welcomed, and many inches of newsprint have been devoted to the different views in several areas of the city.

It is against that backdrop – and with the knowledge that the city is not looking its best right now with uncollected and overflowing bins reported daily – that the job of Transport and Environment Convener became vacant after the election. This is a huge role covering bins, recycling rates, road layout, condition and of course potholes – some of the main topics of conversation in the back of any black taxi and the subject of more councillors' questions at a full council meeting than any other portfolio.

Labour's Cllr Scott Arthur was rather unexpectedly appointed to the role last Thursday morning when the Labour group formed

a minority administration with 13 out of the 63 councillors elected in May 2022.

Just after he was named as the new Convener, he spoke to the full council explaining that he agreed with the SNP councillors who had expressed their concerns about the Conservative government, but he had not heard any of the SNP members admitting that the SNP Government could do more to deal with the cost of living crisis, and that some of their policies have made it worse.

He said: "That is the balance we need in this chamber. We need to stand up for the people, everybody in our city, irrespective of what our party is. That's our job. In terms of the programme for government we didn't put ours online the day before this meeting – [we published ours about two months](#) ago. That is what we are standing on, that's what people are voting for today.

"It's the most progressive, radical and most left wing programme this city has seen for decades. That is what we are going to implement. The policies here on getting to net zero, on increasing active travel funding by 50% and building more council houses – not unaffordable, not affordable houses, but council housing – that is what we are going to do. And we will do that while also focusing on service delivery. We will not be telling people that the condition of the roads are improving when they can look out of their windows and see that they are not. We won't be telling people that council houses are getting built when they are not. We will be truthful and we will be honest about the challenges our city faces.

"And we will send Cllr Day to COSLA to stand up for our city. I back some of the policies in the SNP/Green programme, I absolutely do, and I hope we can take forward some of their ideas around the tram network. But a business case is only a start and we need funding to deliver these projects. With Cllr Day in COSLA those arguments will be made alongside other

council leaders right across this country.

“Everybody in this chamber has a duty to stand up for our city and demand that it is fairly funded.

“Going forward – I look forward to us all working together. When we work together is when this chamber is at its best. We need to focus on where we agree, but there are only three parties in this chamber who gained votes and gained seats in the election – the LibDems, Greens and Labour. Our first call must be to them as they are parties in the ascendancy, but I am open to having discussions with all parties in this chamber.”

Cllr Scott Arthur Transport and Environment Convener



Cllr Scott Arthur PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter

A cyclist and an engineer, he brings a fresh face to the job, (although he claims it will be a temporary position) and when

asked for one word to describe his first week in the job he replied "positive". He regards the basic services like bins and potholes as crucial. He said: "Ultimately it's the basics that people want when they pay their council tax. People are proud to live in Edinburgh, but sometimes they're ashamed of what they're seeing."

The first Transport and Environment Committee (TEC) meeting was to be held before summer to progress the Experimental Traffic Regulation Order (ETROs) which retain some of the Spaces for People measures in place, but now officers have decided that will not be required and the first TEC meeting will be held on 18 August instead.

Cllr Arthur began: "Well, first of all I guess even last Wednesday I didn't expect to be doing the job on the Thursday. So that was an interesting 24 hours for me. But it's been good actually, because I have had quite a few reasonably short discussions with key people in the council just to talk about issues that are arising. And also to let me ask some 'daft laddie' questions along the way.

"Something I am quite keen to get an understanding of is the mismatch, if there is any, between workload and resource. So what I see from being a ward councillor, is some quite basic stuff. For example we had approvals for speed limit reductions in January 2021 that have still not happened yet. And I think that's down to basically staff workload. So right across the board, whenever I meet people, this is what I'm trying to understand – actually what work do you have to do? And how does the staff resource match to that?"

This is an engineer's approach – looking for some data on which to form opinions and actions. When it comes to household bins for example Cllr Arthur has formed the view that generally it works quite well – but admits there is room for improvement on city streets.

He said: "I think household waste collection in Edinburgh seems to be done relatively well. I'm not saying there's not issues, but my discussions with the staff seem to tell me that things are going well.

"Where we're struggling is street cleanliness, and also road condition. And I think there's an acceptance, and staff are very clear, that basically, that's a resource issue.

"They are some way short on the finance that they need to really do as best as they can on street cleanliness, and I think likewise with road condition. And that is not going to change going forward. The government announced this week that there are going to be further cuts coming to local government, if nothing changes.

"So I would like all these services to set Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). And what we'll do is meet with the officers, and then at forthcoming Transport and Environment (TEC) meetings, we'll get an update, say, on road condition for example.

"And the question we will be asking them is if the budget doesn't change what can you do over the next five years to improve road condition? And if we're able to increase it, what difference will that make and what will be the impact of cutting it?

"What I see TEC doing is actually measuring performance against what's been promised right at the start of the administration. And, of course I'm hopeful that approach will encourage both people in my party and other parties to think about the implications of both cutting or increasing spending, and also encourage the staff to think about different ways to do things, about using staff better in a supported way."



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I suggested to him that this seems to be a very pragmatic, scientific approach which Cllr Arthur accepted could even be a compliment. But he admitted: “This came out of discussions with officers, so it is something they like as well. But it’s true, I’m an engineer and so I do value data more. And I like to measure things. But I want to be sure that when we are using KPIs, it’s actually measuring performance, rather than people simply just trying to tick the KPI box.

“I had a long discussion about temporary road repairs, and whether or not they are actually improving the road surface. Of course they are – but whether or not they were actually meeting expectations, and about where we can get it right first time more often.

“I’m keen that we do new things and exciting things, but I’m also keen that we scrutinise the basic delivery of services – our bins getting uplifted, increasing recycling rates, filling potholes – all these basics, because ultimately it’s the

basics that people want when they pay their council tax.

“When I was speaking to council officers about this, it was them telling me that the city centre isn’t good enough – they were telling me, I didn’t have to tell them. I am very mindful, though, the impact that both Covid, and the financial situation over the last few years has had on staff wellbeing, staff morale, and all these things. So we have to take staff with us as well.”

A new approach to transport and environment matters

Cllr Arthur said that he is reaching out to ward councillors to give him guidance on local issues such as the issue of disabled parking in Inverleith next to the Botanics, and also talking to the members of TEC to find common ground for the committee to work on in the next few years.

He said: “I’ve already contacted Cllr Booth and Cllr Macinnes to set up meetings, because I know they’ve established a common platform. So I want to see which parts of that I can work with them on, and then which parts of my manifesto they can support. And that would give us a core of things, and I can speak to the Lib Dems, and also the Conservatives.

“Cllr Lesley Macinnes brought huge projects to TEC, you know, the City Centre Transformation, City Mobility Plan, the tramline extension, and inputted directly into City Plan 2030. And these are huge things that I’m absolutely committed to seeing through.

“But really, that rate of change, we can’t really continue that. So what we’ll have to do is consolidate to take us forward. But the biggest challenge this administration has to face over the next five years is the rate that houses are going to be getting built inside Edinburgh, and around

Edinburgh.

“So what I’m trying to do is to restart dialogue with surrounding local authorities to talk about the amount of cars, which are coming into Edinburgh, you know, 50,60, 70,000 cars per day pre Covid. And think about what we have to do to reduce the number of cars coming into the city. And that has to be about carrots and sticks.

“I know that at least one of the parties put forward a plan for a congestion charge. I don’t really think it was workable. But what I want to do is start off by speaking to local authorities, the surrounding local authorities and say, look, let’s define the problem that we’re facing, which is that Edinburgh is the most congested city – one of the most congested cities in the UK – we’ve got air quality problems, and we’ve got wellbeing problems.

“So let’s define that problem, and then once we’ve defined the problem, let’s work on a solution together. We can’t build these tens of thousands of houses, for people to continue to drive in but I recognise that if we say to people – which is what a congestion charge is doing – “Stop driving into Edinburgh” – If there’s no alternative, they’re just going to pay the charge and continue driving. And that’s not what we want.

“We’ve seen in Nottingham, where they introduced the workplace parking levy that it did not actually reduce congestion. And in fact traffic continues to increase in Nottingham. And that’s because when you price some people out of using their car, it just frees up road space for people who can afford it. And that’s a problem we have to solve. Raising money is great, but we’ll have to solve congestion.”

Consensual politics

In the very early days of this new administration, now just a week old, criticism has been levelled at the Labour Party saying they will have to depend on Lib Dem and Conservative assistance or support to get any plans passed by council committees. When The Edinburgh Reporter spoke to Kevin Lang, leader of the Liberal Democrats, he said that he will only vote with the administration if his group is in agreement with whatever they are proposing, and will vote against if not.

Cllr Arthur said: "I think the dirty secret is that most councillors agree on most things, and most reports going through committee go through without vote. Often where there is disagreement it can be a bit of a pantomime at times – a bit of grandstanding, I have to say, and we're all guilty of that – I'm not immune to it myself.

"But yes I'm open to working with all parties. So that's why I've reached out to the Greens and the SNP in the first instance to try to agree that common platform. And that's why I've also been quite openly giving Lesley Macinnes credit for some of the good things she's done going forward. I have been critical of Lesley Macinnes in the past, but I agree with her on most of the stuff that's come through TEC – not all of it. But that's life, isn't it?

"And these members of TEC, Lesley Macinnes, Chas Booth, Kevin Lang – I'm not sure quite sure who the transport person is for the Conservatives yet – these people all have something to offer, and I'm perfectly open to working with them. I think each individual vote will need a different coalition to take it forward, that is my prediction. We saw that in the last administration – it was quite often that the Greens would vote with us on the sustainable transport things but where we had to do a bit of, you know, actually making life easier for car drivers, often it was the Conservatives.

“I’m hopeful, though that the tone will change. I’ve been really open about how the Transport Committee affected my well being. And I spoke to another councillor who said exactly the same, and I think we have to change that. I want to be clear I don’t blame Convener Lesley Macinnes for that – I blame everybody on the committee, including myself, of course.

The best thing that happened during the first week?

Cllr Arthur said: “I went to a community event run by a local church where they give free food to people in Oxfgangs. That’s normally my highlight of the week and it still is. So all this other stuff’s been great, but it’s still good actually connecting real people which is really positive rather than people trying to lobby me for things all the time, you know, at all levels.”

Critical Mass Ride Saturday 28 May 2022



Cllr Scott Arthur taking part in the Critical Mass Edinburgh ride on 28 May 2022 PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter
31 May 2022 The Low Emission Zone (LEZ) began in Edinburgh

although enforcement will not begin for two years. Cllr Arthur admitted this was a big ticket item that the previous Transport Convener, Lesley Macinnes had progressed. He said: "I was very clear that the LEZ is really a project that Cllrs Macinnes and Doran, and of course, council staff, took forward and they deserve huge credit for that. And here's me just steps in at the last minute, and gets my picture taken."

There will be more photo opps in the future, but the Transport and Environment Convener will also be expected to set out plans for policy in the next five years, and see that through. We look forward to the first TEC meeting and whatever is on the agenda then.



L-R John Bynorth Environmental Protection Scotland, Transport Minister Jenny Gilruth, Gareth Brown from Asthma+Lung UK, The City of Edinburgh Council Transport Convener Scott Arthur, Minister for Environment Màiri McAllan

The Labour Manifesto:



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Parties manifestos on transport matters



Cllr Scott Arthur was re-elected in Colinton/Fairmilehead Ward
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