

Chambers ‘not safe for disabled people’ as councillor moves out

An Edinburgh councillor says she has been forced to stop working in the City Chambers as it is “not safe for disabled people”.

Kayleigh O’Neill, who is a wheelchair user, revealed she has moved into an office in the council’s Waverley Court headquarters after being left “without assistance” during fire alarm drills.

Having repeatedly pushed for changes to make the chambers more wheelchair-friendly, she said she now “can’t wait around any longer”.

Following her election as a Green councillor in 2022 she told Local Democracy Reporting Service that “structural change” was essential following multiple access barriers on her first day when it emerged the lift was broken.

That was just the beginning of her problems with the 270-year-old building, as she said its entrances, narrow corridors and lack of procedures in place to ensure a quick and safe evacuation for wheelchair users made getting around and working there even more of an impossible task.

But things came to a head last year after a fire alarm went off during a meeting with disabled groups and organisations – ironically to discuss accessibility – and the councillor was “left on the seventh floor without assistance or knowledge of

how to leave”.

She said: “A number of disabled people and mobility aid users were left in the lurch that day and it should have been a wake up call for the Council. But more drills happened, and I was left every time.

“I have been working with staff since May 2022 to fix the gaps in health & safety and accessibility (alongside my other roles) – but I can’t wait around any longer.

“As well as ‘life and death’ type safety and access, I have found it impossible to work truly independently in a space that was not built for me, and in an environment that does not prioritise access over aesthetics.”

Councillor O’Neill said she had “mixed emotions” about the move, adding: “I’ve been pushing from day one to make the Chambers as accessible as possible but I cannot risk my life and work by staying there.”

She said: “Waverley Court is amazing in comparison. Multiple lifts, large accessible toilets, variety of touchdown spaces etc – It was built after the DDA after all.

“It will be a difficult transition as I am now the only councillor based outside the City Chambers, but so far officers and colleagues have been fantastic in supporting the move.

“I’ll of course keep fighting for Chambers access from afar. We have to think to the future – in 2027 I want more disabled people elected and that means being realistic with the Council spaces available to us.”



Councillor Kayleigh O'Neill. Image: Kayleigh O'Neill.