

New council chief says tourist tax can clean up the city – and also support culture

In a wide-ranging interview the new boss at Edinburgh Council said he believes the tourist tax will be spent on cleaning up the city, and also in supporting culture and heritage in Edinburgh – such as the Fringe.

But Paul Lawrence said he is really not in charge of running the city – saying that job lies fairly and squarely with all the elected councillors in the capital – and he said he has no seat at the table in settling the threatened bin strike.

While that industrial action is hanging over all Scottish local authorities, council officers in Edinburgh are working on a report about what the Visitor Levy could be spent on when it is eventually introduced – probably in the middle of 2026 –

and the suggestion is it will be spent on cleaning the streets and other public areas. So with a general election already behind him since he started in his new role, it has been a busy time.

Paul Lawrence has worked with The City of Edinburgh Council since 2015, and for longer than that in local authorities elsewhere. His is a well kent face in Waverley Court, the council's administrative hub, and he has now taken up his new role as Chief Executive Officer of the capital's local authority, following a competitive recruitment process. The job carries with it a salary of around £200,000, but he maintains that he is really not the one who makes the decisions.

Mr Lawrence said: "Lots of people think it's me – and that is 100% wrong. The only people who make any decisions of consequence in the council are elected councillors. But, unlike the civil service which works for the government, we work for **all** 63 councillors. Our job is to provide them with advice, with information on issues and to make recommendations about what we think they should do. We have a very clear scheme of delegation in the city."

BIN STRIKES

So it will not be Lawrence who negotiates any deal with bin workers who have announced this week their timetable for strike action if an acceptable wage deal is not found. It is up to the local authority body COSLA, with its administrative staff and the council leaders from all over Scotland (who each have an equal voice) to negotiate the settlement which is currently a matter of dispute.

Mr Lawrence said: "There is collective bargaining around local government pay in Scotland, with all the councils joined together, and COSLA, The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. COSLA negotiates on behalf of the councils with

the recognised trade unions. This is a discussion between the employers represented by COSLA and the trade unions and I don't need to say that individual councils are in an extremely challenging financial position."

Provision for council staff wages was made in the council budget which is set annually in February, and in Edinburgh the amount provided for by the council and the amount asked for by unions, are different. COSLA having made an offer of 3.2%, which has been rejected, has now asked The Scottish Government for assistance – and Shona Robison MSP held a meeting with unions earlier in the week. Whether or not there will be more funding from The Scottish Government to help with the pay settlement remains to be seen – but it will have to be made quickly to avoid the streets piling up with rubbish in Edinburgh in the same way as they did in 2022. At this point in the year it is widely estimated that the population doubles, so the problem in the capital is more acute than elsewhere.



Bin strikes in Edinburgh in 2022 – and the rubbish which piled up in the Grassmarket during the festival.
The Chief Executive's role is a supportive one, but he is not

at the forefront of any deals. He said: “Our funding has more or less stayed the same, but the demands on our services and the cost of those services has gone up. So it doesn’t need a genius to work out if your income broadly stays the same, but costs and demand go up, there’s a gap. So I am doing everything I can to support the officials in COSLA to try and kind of come forward with a new deal that we think will be acceptable – but it is a difficult one.”

And Lawrence admits freely that the city is not starting from a pristine condition. He often cycles or walks around in Edinburgh and is just as aware as anyone else living here that the capital needs a good clean up. He said that the streets are indeed swept and cleaned – just “not as often as we want them to be” – leading neatly into discussion of what the Visitor Levy or Tourist tax could mean for Edinburgh.

TOURIST TAX

Council officers are currently working on the proposals for implementing the Visitor Levy legislation which was passed by The Scottish Parliament earlier this year. The administration – both under the SNP/Labour coalition and now under Labour – has long said that Edinburgh wants to be first to introduce the new charge. The possibility of extra income of at least £25 million is not to be sniffed at, and councillors will meet on 22 August to learn what the options are for the collection regime and also allocating the spend.

Lawrence says that the collection would be relatively easy for the council – explaining they already collect council tax, business rates and other charges some of which have to be passed on to other agencies.

The proposed scheme will be examined by councillors later this month, then there will be a three month public consultation. After that the legislation makes it mandatory to have an 18 month gap between the council deciding to implement the scheme

and it coming into effect. This was resisted by Edinburgh council who have already consulted on the scheme some years ago, and are keen to put it into place, but it was accommodation providers who asked parliament to put the requirement for a lead in time in the act.

Once implemented the income can be used for the priorities which people in Edinburgh talk about all the time – street cleanliness, removal of graffiti, fixing paving slabs on Princes Street. The council boss said: “These are the absolute basics. People go abroad and remark that it is so much better kept than at home – and we want to get to that level. So undoubtedly we will need a significant section of the resources to spend on that. But without the cultural and heritage offer of the city then Edinburgh isn’t Edinburgh. So we will suggest that a proportion of these resources goes on culture – both the buildings and cultural activities.”

The report which will be published later this month will recommend the rate that Edinburgh will set (the legislation proposes a percentage rather than a fixed amount), any proposed cap on the charge and exemptions to it. Paul continued: “I am not going to tell you right now the rate which we will recommend but this report will show how much money is likely to be available from the tax.”

The new Chief Executive drew on his experience of the lead up to the passing of the legislation and said that while the hospitality industry in Scotland says it is suffering under a significant taxation burden compared to its competitors there is a counter argument.

He said: “I understand these claims but the counter to that is that visitors paying a relatively modest visitor levy is established international practice. And there is no evidence it stops people from going to destinations indeed, you will read stories, around the world of destinations with visitor levies where people remain concerned about the sheer volume of

visitors coming.

“And if you stand outside the Balmoral or stand outside the Apple store across the road, and ask yourself is that public realm, the streetscape and so on what we need? Do we need to invest to improve it? The answer is yes, and this is a directly a mechanism which will improve the customer experience for people in Edinburgh will have significant value.”



Balmoral Clock from the roof of St Andrew's House

REPORTS

Some council reports prepared by officers can be extremely long, and one of the things that Mr Lawrence says he has tried to do as Director of Place was make the reports more readable and shorter. As an English Literature graduate he is well qualified for that task, and he also recognises that the reports have to be readable for everyone including members of the public. He is quite clear that since all council business

is discussed in public the council reports need to be “fair, balanced and give informed recommendations”.

Emergency decisions have to be referred back to elected members after they have been made, or discussed with the five political group leaders before being decided. During Covid there was a slightly different set up with a Leadership Advisory Panel of political leaders and senior council officers, but now it is business as usual again and Mr Lawrence says that officers try to avoid taking decisions under delegated powers if at all possible.

While the pandemic was at its height, the council met online, initially using Skype and then embracing the new technology of Teams which was then in its infancy and which is now a part of everyday life. And it was at that point that a few members of council staff – including Lawrence – became ill due mainly to the long hours of sitting at a computer screen in meetings. The council now has a revised scheme to ensure that, mainly for health and wellbeing reasons, meetings are shorter, and have more breaks. Lawrence said: “It was definitely a problem – a bit like long plane journeys when your blood doesn’t circulate properly and so on.”

Low occupancy at Waverley Court

The council headquarters is a huge building with more than 1,600 workstations and 60 “touchdown desks” on several floors all of which are open plan. The new Chief Executive has a separate office (which he chooses not to use except for interviews such as ours) and a boardroom with a pretty neglected balcony looking to Waverley Station. As some council staff can work from home, there is some space in the building which was unused. The building is now shared with Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA), VisitScotland and others are expected to be announced soon. Lawrence said: “We are hopeful that more public sector colleagues will join us in

this building, and we're in quite advanced discussions about that."

The council has also invested in creating fewer desk spaces and more areas where people can have informal chats or meetings to create what Lawrence calls "the right kind of work environment". He said that any organisation which "does not have flexibility baked in is not going to be competitive in the labour market" – and this is an organisation with more than 18,000 employees, many of whom are teachers and teaching staff.

Now that the general election is over and when the festivals are past, the new boss plans visits to schools and other council offices outside the city centre to find out what is happening from the people working for the council away from Waverley Court. He realises that he does not know about certain areas of the council and is keen to learn as much as he can, concentrating in the first few weeks on children's services and social care services.

And what is the one thing he would like to change in the next few years? He would like to empower more frontline managers to make decisions about certain areas without having to go six rungs up the ladder. He concluded: "By the time I have finished doing this job I would like people to think I empowered more of our people on the front line – and I know that people are not happy with the basics, but if our staff have the resources then they can do a great job. They prove that time and again when we have the resources, but at the moment we do live in an extremely difficult financial environment."

