

Labour says by-election 'crucial' to holding onto power in council

Labour has said victory in an upcoming Edinburgh Council by-election will be "crucial" to the party clinging onto power in the City Chambers.

Voters in the Colinton/Fairmilehead ward will go to the polls in November to elect a new councillor to replace Labour's Scott Arthur who is the new MP for Edinburgh South West.

And as nominations open, parties have begun declaring candidates and rallying local activists to knock doors.

Promoting a recent campaigning day in Buckstone, party supporters were told the by-election "is crucial to allowing us to keep control of the council," on a web page advertising the event.

Edinburgh's 12-strong Labour group has ruled as a minority administration with less than a fifth of seats in the chamber since the 2022 election, when it cut ties with its SNP ex-coalition partners after Scottish party leader Anas Sarwar ruled out any formal coalitions in local authorities.

While there is no formal agreement in place, the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives have supported Labour in confidence and supply votes to remain in power and pass budgets. SNP and Green opposition councillors accuse the three

parties, who make up a majority, of being in bed politically, pointing to paid roles on licensing and planning committees given to Lib Dem and Tory members.

Councillor Stephen Jenkinson, the authority's transport convener and election agent for Colinton/Fairmilehead Labour candidate, Sheila Gilmore, said if his party lost a seat nothing would change "overnight" but it would "probably be in the hands of others".

An unlikely victory for the Lib Dems, who came fourth in the ward in terms of first preference votes in 2022, would put them on 14 and could rekindle internal discussions around whether they should attempt to lead the council. However if ousted Labour would be unlikely to back the chamber's second largest group to form an administration, and it's feared this would open the door to the SNP and Greens taking power.

"The council is finely balanced," Cllr Jenkinson said. "It's always hard to say what would happen if you didn't win. Because like me and everybody involved in every campaign, we're always in it to win it, especially a seat where we're expected to retain it."

Asked about the message sent to activists, he replied: "I think it is a crucial by-election for us, as are all by-elections.

"By-elections are tough, this one will be no different. We're going to do what we can to ensure we've got another Labour victory, and then we carry on.

He added: "The guidance from the party centrally hasn't changed. So therefore formal arrangements with any party isn't an option that's on the table."

At a full council meeting this week Greens councillor Susan Rae said: "The Labour Party call out for volunteers in the upcoming by-election says that this election is crucial to

allowing Labour to control of the council.

“Can you confirm that this means if you are planning on standing down as council leader if Labour lose this by-election?”

Council leader Cammy Day said he’d “not seen that particular leaflet”.

He said: “I suppose what we’re looking for is people from all over the city from all parties come and rally around Labour’s candidate Sheila Gilmore in the Colinton/Fairmilehead by-election. Sheila is of course a veteran in politics and I hope that we see her back in this chamber.”

Candidates announced by parties so far for the Colinton/Fairmilehead by-election on November 14th are:

- Scottish Labour – Sheila Gilmore
- Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party – Neil Culthbert
- Independent – David Henry
- Scottish National Party – Marianna Clyde
- Scottish Greens – Daniel Milligan
- Scottish Liberal Democrats – Louise Spence

Nominations opened today, Friday 27 September, and must be submitted to the council by 4pm on Monday 14 October.

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter