

Row over bid to sell Lord Provost's chain and cars

A row has erupted between Edinburgh councillors over a bid to sell-off the Lord Provost's chain and cars.

The City Chambers' Green Group proposed exploring the move to cut costs from the £518k civic budget – and were backed by all but two SNP councillors who voted against their party in defence of the historic regalia.

The Provost has two BMWs and is often ferried to engagements, which the council says is necessary “for the purposes of safety and security” to safeguard his 18-carat gold chain encrusted with 492 diamonds.

The luxury vehicles, which are also used to transport the Deputy Provost and the city's Bailies – a role fulfilled by councillors from all political groups – ran up costs of nearly £50k between 2019 and 2022.

The Greens questioned whether there was “scope to reduce use of civic vehicles, such as through reduced use of, or sale of, civic regalia” and “sale of surplus vehicles” in an addendum tabled as Edinburgh's Lord Provost Robert Aldridge presented his annual report at a full council meeting on Thursday, August 29.

And SNP councillor Neil Gardiner asked: “Do we really need to take the jewels out on the streets every day?”

He added: “I find it a really tenuous argument that we need a car that costs tens of thousands of pounds to buy and maintain to protect the necklace when we're in the middle of a cost of

living crisis.”

Conservative councillor Jo Mowat hit back, saying: “This is not a man wandering around the city in a necklace; this is the Lord Provost wearing the chain of office, representing our city.

“We demean the role if we regard it in other ways.

“These are chains of office that belong to the city and they link us back to our past. They are part of the visible thread that connects us back through the 900 years and the history of this council.”

While backbench Labour councillor Katrina Faccenda took issue with the dress code for the Provost and Bailies at events, telling colleagues: “We should not be going around wearing robes all the time.

“If people want to be part of a club that allows them to dress up they can do that.

“But I don’t think that should be a central part of the role of councillors.”

At the meeting Cllr Aldridge, a Lib Dem councillor of 40 years who has been the capital’s figurehead since 2022, defended one of the cars being allowed to park on Cockburn Street by the City Chambers’ back entrance during the festival while residents were prevented from doing so.

One local forced to park several streets away while strict restrictions were in place over August was reported to have said at the time that the Provost was “hardly leading by example”.

Green Group co-leader Chas Booth said: “What some people have said to me about the recent issue of the civic car on Cockburn Street is that it sends a message of one rule for us and another for the Lord Provost.”

Cllr Aldridge said the civic cars “were granted an exemption to permit them to use Cockburn Street during the festival period”. Responding to the original report last month, he said: “I use public transport where I can.”

However council leader Cammy Day said it was not up to councillors to sell-off the civic regalia which belonged to the city. “There’s a huge risk to [officer] health and safety for potentially walking around the streets with millions of pounds of jewellery that belongs to the city, and a risk to their health and safety,” he said.

The Green’s proposal was defeated 35 to 27 in a vote, which saw SNP councillors Norrie Work and Cathy Fullerton break the whip to vote with Labour, Lib Dems and the Conservatives.

Cllr Work said: “I think some people don’t understand the importance of the civic side of Edinburgh.

“If you do arrive in a car, yes it might sound grand but you’re arriving relaxed, you’re arriving there with the support of the city officers to make sure you’re standing in the right place.”

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter