

# **Division continues over who will run Edinburgh Council**

**The group currently running the minority administration in Edinburgh is divided over whether they should continue to do so.**

A meeting on Monday was inconclusive over backing their newly elected group leader, Cllr Jane Meagher, as the Labour candidate for Council Leader. The group has just 10 councillors out of 63 positions. There are two vacant roles which will be filled in January after a by election in Colinton/Fairmilehead.

**It is possible that the leadership of Edinburgh Council may not be decided at all this year, although formal steps towards appointing a leader will begin this week.**

There is a full council meeting on Thursday when most of the 61 councillors will convene at the City Chambers or they will join the meeting virtually.

A report [by the Chief Executive](#) has been lodged in council papers which will allow candidates for the position of council leader to be nominated as replacements for Cllr Cammy Day who [resigned last week](#).

The proposals put forward by each party group may either be

written or made verbally at the meeting.

This will depend on the detail of what each political group is proposing. For example, if there is a proposal to put a whole new administration in place of the existing one, then best practice is that these proposals are made in writing. This is what happens each May in a non-election year when the council usually rubber-stamps the current administration, but these are unusual circumstances.

By late afternoon on Wednesday 18 December each of the opposition parties is likely to put forward a formal amendment to the Chief Executive's report. So what are the proposals they might make?

## **LABOUR GROUP**

Edinburgh Labour met on Sunday and chose Cllr Jane Meagher as their group leader. It would be usual that Cllr Meagher is also the group's candidate for council leader, but at a meeting on Monday The Edinburgh Reporter understands that half of the Labour group do not want to continue to lead the administration at all. The group are said to be divided equally over continuing in administration, and it is in doubt whether the group will put forward any candidate for leader or any other plans for leadership of the council.

It is open to Labour to try to continue to lead the council as a minority administration of 10 councillors which they had been doing under Cllr Day's leadership, beginning however with 13 councillors in May 2022 – but it goes without saying that they would need support from other parties.

It is clear that Cllr Kevin Lang the Liberal Democrat group leader is pleased with the choice of Cllr Meagher as Labour group leader. On X he wrote: "I want to congratulate Cllr Jane Meagher on her election as Labour's new group leader. Thanks is also due to Cllr Mandy Watt who stepped up in what I know

was an incredibly difficult set of circumstances.

“Looking ahead, the Liberal Democrat group think it’s important to provide stability at the Council, especially as we look to agree a new budget. We’ve worked well with Jane Meagher in the past, particularly on tackling Edinburgh’s housing emergency. So we are looking forward to hearing more from Jane on her plans and priorities ahead of Thursday’s Council meeting.”

The Edinburgh Reporter has asked Cllr Meagher for comment on her group’s policies with her as leader, but has not received any response as yet.

The Edinburgh Reporter has asked Cllr Lang for comment and has, as yet, had no reply from him.

## **SHELTER**

Cllr Jane Meagher is currently Housing and Homelessness Convener, but only this last week has had an encounter with housing charity Shelter Scotland.

Scotland’s housing and homelessness charity, Shelter, demanded at the end of last week that Scottish Ministers and the Scottish Housing Regulator intervene against The [City of Edinburgh](#) Council after the local authority voted “in favour of stripping homeless households of their basic rights”. This was an unprecedented demand.

The charity said that at a meeting of the city’s Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee on Tuesday, councillors “voted six to five in favour of proposals to strip people experiencing homelessness of their right to adequate housing through the provision of suitable temporary and permanent housing”.

**What happened at the meeting was that councillors voted 6-5 against an emergency motion lodged by Green councillor, Ben**

## **Parker.**

This asked that the Housing Convener would do a u-turn on a letter sent previously by the former council leader and the Housing Convener asking the government to relax three separate pieces of legislation relating to homelessness rights.

In the motion, the Green group requested the Convener to write again to the Government confirming that the council did not wish to “downgrade the rights of homeless people” but should instead seek additional funding from the Government in order to “ensure that all homeless people can be treated with dignity and respect, in the way the law intends”.

So, on the face of it, the council voted against protecting people’s rights. However, thanks to an SNP amendment, councillors did agree that if the Government were to agree any relaxation in the rules protecting homeless people, policy changes at a local authority level would need to be agreed at a committee meeting.

Cllr Ben Parker said: “It is shocking that Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative Councillors were unwilling to support my Emergency Motion and it is right that Shelter have raised concerns about the rights of homeless people being rolled back.

“The way through the crisis in homelessness is not to change the goalposts and engage in a race to the bottom on human rights, but is to review the existing Council approach to tackling the Housing Emergency and to make the case to governments for additional funding and support. It was wrong for the Council Leader and Convener to send this letter in the first instance, and it was wrong of committee to ignore the voices of advocates for dignity and respect in the housing system.”

The council had already confirmed last month they had been placing homeless households in unlicensed HMO (Houses in

Multiple Occupancy) properties as temporary accommodation. There is also the question of “unsuitable” accommodation – housing which is not in the best repair for example.



Alison Watson CEO Shelter Scotland

Alison Watson, director of Shelter Scotland said: “It should outrage

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“Edinburgh’s homelessness crisis is partly of the Council’s own making, but instead of showing compassion and seeking to help some of the most disenfranchised people in our society, they have chosen instead to punish them in this inhumane way by taking away hard-won rights.

“Shelter Scotland has lost confidence in the leadership of the City of [Edinburgh](#) Council to do the right thing and uphold the rule of law. The leadership has systematically failed homeless people for years and is now stripping them of their rights to cover up their own failures.

“I have written to the First Minister John Swinney MSP, urging him to use his powers to call in the council’s homelessness strategy for scrutiny. It is our belief that this will highlight that the current strategy is not only unfit for purpose and cannot guarantee the rights of people at risk of homelessness but is in fact in breach of the law.

“The Scottish Government must do more to fully fund local services through the upcoming budget. However, more money won’t work if the wrong decisions are being taken locally on how to spend it.

“I have also written to the Scottish Housing Regulator as recent assurances provided by the council leadership in their annual statement clearly do not hold up to scrutiny. Elected and unelected members have shown themselves to be incapable of following the rule of law. They must reverse the committee’s decision or else immediately step aside.”

The council argued that this was factually incorrect, and the decision was not a “roll back of rights but that they had written to the government asking for a dispensation to use



unlicensed HMOs as long as there was a “focus on the property as being safe to occupy”.

## **LIBERAL DEMOCRATS**



Cllr Kevin Lang Almond Ward in May 2022 at the City Chambers  
The Liberal Democrats had a meeting last week when nothing was decided about their plans – they appear to be adopting a “wait and see” approach. Any enquiries to the group leader Kevin Lang for any further information by The Edinburgh Reporter have not been answered.

According to The Herald, the Liberal Democrats preferred Cllr Jane Meagher for Labour leader and as shown above from Cllr Lang’s comments on X he does appear to back her, and is looking to discuss plans with her. Whether she has a mandate from her group is further complicated by the fact that she is on holiday in Tanzania this week visiting family.

The Liberal Democrat group does not appear keen to work in some kind of coalition with the SNP.

In addition the LibDems do not appear keen to step up to form a minority administration under their current leader Cllr Lang either, which has attracted open criticism of him. Cllr Lang works as Executive Director for External Relations at The Law Society of Scotland, and is part of the Society's senior leadership team.

Labour backbencher, Cllr Katrina Faccenda, has been openly critical of the Liberal Democrats. She said on X: "It is really disappointing to watch a party which polls 10% support nationally on a good day, with only 4 MSPs set the agenda for Edinburgh council, without stepping up to lead administration and even getting away with direct intervention in who should lead the Labour Group."

## INDEPENDENT Councillors



Ross McKenzie (third from left) joins a protest outside the City Chambers

Cllr Ross McKenzie left the Labour Group dramatically during a budget debate in February 2023 when Labour voted with the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives. He now sits as an

independent councillor, and while his vote could be important in getting a party into power or someone into the position of leader at Thursday's meeting, he is clear that he will not rejoin the Labour group. Cllr McKenzie has also confirmed that he will not be standing as a candidate for council leader.

His defection from the Labour group reduced the elected 13 members to just 12 at the time. The number of Labour councillors reduced further when former councillor Scott Arthur became an MP in July 2024, and then last week when Cllr Cammy Day was administratively suspended by Scottish Labour the group was reduced to just 10 elected members.

Cllr McKenzie told The Edinburgh Reporter he does not see any sign of the voting "bloc" changing. He said: "My position, since the story about Cammy came out in the Sunday Mail, is that by Thursday 19th, Labour would be considered too toxic to put into administration. I have always ruled out the status quo from the outset. There are competence issues and numbers issues, but I also think that this small group are now tainted."

Considering the possibility of the council making no decision at all about council leader, Cllr McKenzie agreed that if the decision is simply continued to January or even early February then that is a real possibility. He too was critical of the Liberal Democrats saying that if the group leader "sits on his hands and lets the SNP and Greens in" which he believes is a genuine possibility at this point.

Cllr McKenzie said: "Everyone is trying to second guess what is in Kevin Lang's head. He is playing a very elaborate game. It does not seem to me that the Lib Dems have spoken to Labour to get them to support a LibDem led administration.

"They have played a weird game about trying to choose the Labour leader instead."

Cllr Cammy Day is also sitting at present as an independent

councillor.

## **SNP GROUP**

Leader of the SNP group, Cllr Simita Kumar said they are due to have “multiple meetings before Thursday”.

She said: “We are trying to engage with everyone because no one has a clear majority, and the council is in total chaos right now, and it’s unstable. My job, really is to find a way to provide stability, to provide really good, strong leadership and direction.

“We have good things coming up like the Transient Visitor Levy – that budget will be huge. Unless we have good cross party engagement, collaboration and understanding we won’t be able to achieve anything for the city. That’s my worry.

“So we are trying to reach out to all parties if possible. Some are easier than others because we have lots of policy similarities with say the Green Party and we are far away policy-wise from the Conservatives. The Liberal Democrats have told us it’s a no go and that is a shame because they are still trying to support labor by sort of really dictating who their leader should be, which is unfair for the city.

“Labour has 10 people and they have more roles to fill than they have people. I think in all of this, there’s a strong responsibility that falls on the SNP, but equally a strong responsibility that falls on the Liberal Democrats who can very easily form a minority administration, but are choosing not to.

“The Accounts Commission said that the political balance is so delicate in the council. Could we possibly even afford to have a Labour administration where they’re not a united front, they’re not a group of Councillors who absolutely agree with each other, or even are unifying at this stage. We know it’s

going to sow further discord and further instability in the council, and that's what we're trying to avoid.

"As the SNP we are the biggest group but nowhere near the majority and so to get real policies through we have to speak to people.

"We want to be able to engage. We want to be able to say to folks, you know, what is the best way for what is the best outcome for Edinburgh, not for groups, not for parties, but what is the best outcome for Edinburgh?"

"Nobody knows what will happen on Thursday."

It is likely that the SNP will put themselves forward as a minority administration suggesting Cllr Kumar as Council Leader and other councillors as Conveners. That may mean cutting a deal with the Greens – but nothing will be clear until the papers are lodged on Wednesday.

## **EDINBURGH GREENS**

A members meeting will be held on Tuesday night when the various options will be examined. In the case of the Green group the local branch has to ratify any moves towards a coalition, for example.

In May 2022 the Greens and the SNP had worked up a plan to form a coalition, but ultimately did not have the votes in the room to get that passed.

At the time it was proposed that Cllr Adam McVey (SNP) would be Leader of the Council and Cllr Steve Burgess (Green) would be Co-Depute Leader of the Council along with Cllr Claire Miller (Green) as Co-Depute Leader of the Council.

It could be that something similar is proposed this time, with different names of course, but it will require sufficient votes.

Cllr Chas Booth, co-convenor of the Edinburgh Green councillors, said: "The events of the last week have led to a crisis for the council, and it appears new allegations surface every few days. There are clearly questions for Labour about what they knew and when, and what action they took in response to allegations.

"Unlike other parties, Greens have not tried to dictate to Labour who they appoint as group leader – that is a question for Labour councillors. However given doubt over the integrity of the Labour group in response to allegations about the former leader, and questions over the competence of such a small group to run the council, it's clear that Labour no longer have either a democratic or moral mandate to speak for the City of Edinburgh. This means it's difficult to see how we could possibly support Labour continuing in office regardless of their choice of leader.

"Greens have called an additional branch meeting on Tuesday where we hope to present a proposal for a progressive alternative to Labour to our members – who will ultimately decide what Green Councillors will support. In the meantime we are continuing to have dialogue with all parties in the council about the best way forward for the city which responds to the growing threat of climate change, the housing emergency, and the social care crisis."

After the Labour Group elected Cllr Jane Meagher as their group leader, a spokesperson for the Greens said: "This means it's difficult to see how we could possibly support Labour continuing in office regardless of their choice of leader.

"Having chosen a Councillor to lead them who just this week has been publicly criticised by one of Scotland's leading housing charities saying they have no faith in her ability to steer the Council through the homelessness crisis, it seems that Labour agree with us that they are not fit to lead." [Read more on the row between Shelter and Edinburgh Council here.](#)



# CONSERVATIVES

The Conservatives are probably not in a position to take power, as they number only 9 councillors, but they could of course be influential in whoever does take over the leadership.

Cllr Iain Whyte, Leader of the Conservative Group, said: “The situation remains confused while we are all made to wait for Labour to sort out their very public ‘internal squabbles’ and the Lib Dem Leader clings to his well-paid job rather than step up and take responsibility. In the meantime, the Conservative Group will continue to consider all the options to break the impasse.

“Our aim is to do the right thing for the people of Edinburgh. They may not always appreciate the Conservative brand in elections, but surveys and Council consultations regularly show they support what we put forward in the Council and agree with our aim to concentrate on improving core Council services. We will support whatever outcome gives us the most influence to do that. Once others get their act together, and we know what is possible, we will come to a decision.”

## Scenarios

There are several possible scenarios and it is difficult to predict which will prevail. But there is also a possibility that no decision will be taken on Thursday and Depute Leader Cllr Mandy Watt will continue as nominative figurehead meantime.

The political make up is finely balanced, with no two parties able to combine sufficient votes to have a majority.

[The papers for Thursday's meeting are here with details of how to watch the webcast either live or as a recording.](#) These

papers will be updated early evening on Wednesday with alternative suggestions from the various opposition groups.

Conservative	9
Green	10
Independent	2
Labour	10
Liberal Democrats	13
SNP	17
Vacant seats	2