

Edinburgh Labour choose Housing Convener as new group leader

The Edinburgh Labour group has chosen Cllr Jane Meagher to be their new leader.

Cllr Meagher was elected first in May 2022 as a councillor for Portobello and Craigmillar, but has had experience in the council as she used to work for former Council Leader Andrew Burns in his office at the City Chambers.

She was appointed Convener of Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work in the minority administration set up two and a half years ago under the leadership of Cllr Cammy Day. [Cllr Day resigned as Council Leader last week.](#)

Cllr Meagher will not necessarily be the Labour administration's nominee to stand for appointment as council leader when the council convenes on Thursday morning at a meeting of the full council.

Any changes will now have to be ratified on Monday night at the normal Labour Group meeting, and also any proposals for political change by the Edinburgh Labour Local Government Committee and the Scottish Executive Committee (SEC) who have to approve any political deals.

She is currently visiting family in Tanzania meaning that today's vote was held virtually. It is understood she will also join the council meeting virtually. [The papers are here.](#) All candidates for council leader must make their stance clear

by Wednesday lunchtime, and further papers will be published later that day.

Whether the Labour group can command authority to run the council with only 10 current councillors will remain to be seen.



Cllr Jane Meagher, Labour. Photo: © 2022, Martin P. McAdam
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Political response

There are no two political groups on the council which can make up a majority administration.

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

Conservative	9
Green	10
Independent	2

Labour	10
Liberal Democrats	13
SNP	17
Vacant seats	2

A spokesperson for the Edinburgh Green group said after Cllr Meagher was elected group leader: "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."

Before the result of the vote was announced, SNP Group leader, Simita Kumar said that her group were trying to engage with everyone in a bid to find "stability, strong leadership and direction". But she thought that Cllr Day's resignation did not lend itself to the Labour group being stable enough to run the council, and she also mentioned the "serious questions" raised by Shelter only this week about the temporary accommodation issues in Edinburgh.

Cllr Kumar said: "Could we possibly afford to have a Labour administration when they are not a united front, and they are not a group of councillors who absolutely agree with each other, or are even unifying at this stage? We know it is going to sow further discord and further instability in the council and that's what we are trying to avoid.

"The Depute Leader of the council, Mandy Watt has told me that she has a mandate from Scottish Labour, but I have asked over and over what is in the best interests of the city of Edinburgh and the people of Edinburgh.

"We and the Liberal Democrats are the two biggest political

groups on the council. Ideally you would have the two biggest parties working together but the Liberal Democrats have told us that is a no go. They are still trying to support Labour by dictating who their leader should be which is unfair for the city. Labour have 10 councillors but they have more roles to cover than people, so I think in all of this there is a strong responsibility which falls on the SNP – but equally on the LibDems who could very easily form a minority administration but choose not to.”

SHELTER MAKE UNPRECEDENTED DEMAND

Scotland’s housing and homelessness charity, Shelter demanded this 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”.

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 write again to the government seeking additional funding and confirming the council did not wish to “downgrade the rights of homeless people”. However councillors agreed if there were to be any policy changes these would be agreed at a committee meeting.

The council had already confirmed last month they had been placing homeless households in unlicensed HMO (Houses in Multiple Occupancy) properties as temporary accommodation.

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

outrage everyone in Scotland that officers and elected members within a local authority have unilaterally decided to strip people in the capital of a fundamental human right.

“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”.

Unlawful HMOs

Before the Housing Committee on 3 December the Housing Convener, Cllr Meagher explained that the use of B&Bs which did not have HMO licences had begun during lockdown and the public health emergency.

The council’s legal team had since advised that the use of any premises without such a licence was unlawful and had to stop by 30 November. There was a flurry of activity by landlords to get licences for their premises.

All of these licensing applications were heard at an emergency meeting of the licensing board on 29 November – and were granted – but some for a restricted period, and others subject to making repairs noted by council inspection officers.

Some of the missing items in these properties relate to basic fire safety – and in several cases the term “intumescent strip” was referred to. This is the strip inside a door jamb which allows inhabitants around 30 minutes to escape from a fire. These were not the worst omissions, and a pattern of lack of maintenance emerged during the meeting when landlords were quizzed by councillors.

Cllr Meagher, said ahead of the meeting: “We’ve always known the use of unlicensed HMOs had to stop and we had actions in place to reduce our dependence on them, however at the same time we’ve also got homeless presentations which continue every day. We never really get on top of the situation.”

The council also brought back around 500 empty homes owned by the council into use for temporary accommodation – 200 of those in the fortnight before the deadline. There was a threat of having to move around 700 people living in unlawful temporary accommodation out into any properties which could be

found. The Edinburgh Reporter understands that this was largely averted by the deadline.

Cllr Meagher said it was not for the council to take steps to grant licences but up to landlords to apply for them. It was only when the council said they would stop paying for the bed and breakfast accommodation that some of the landlords acted.

Some landlords offer accommodation to homeless people at a cost to the council of £80 a night. In the case of one property at Marine Drive in the north of the city we compute that the landlord is being paid in the region of £84,000 per week.

The number of people who live in temporary accommodation in Edinburgh now exceeds 5,000 which is an increase of around 1,500 people since the first lockdown almost five years ago. A housing emergency was declared in the city in November 2023.