

A fresh Green voice on Edinburgh Council

Green Group of Edinburgh Councillors Annual Report, 2007-8

Introduction

In May 2007 16,000 people voted Green in the City of Edinburgh and elected their first ever Green Councillors to three wards in the City - Alison Johnstone in Meadows/Morningside, Maggie Chapman in Leith Walk and Steve Burgess in Southside/Newington. Gavin Corbett came within 18 votes of winning a seat in the City Centre ward and the other Green candidates won a significant share of the vote in many other wards which bodes well for the future.

What constituents say

"What a turn around!!!! - clearly being Green doesn't mean letting the grass grow under your feet!! Thank you so much for your swift and efficacious response."

Greens on the Council

Greens have one place on each of the Council decision making committees. Green Councillors have responsibility for three committees each; Alison Johnstone sits on Policy & Strategy, Education and Culture & Sport, Maggie Chapman on Health, Finance and Economics, Steve Burgess on Transport Infrastructure & Environment, Planning including Development Management and Audit.

Alison Johnstone is also a Bailie of the City of Edinburgh, and has deputised for the Lord Provost at official functions in the last year, including officially opening Hailes Quarry Park in Wester Hailes and hosting a Civic Reception to congratulate the Scottish athletes who participated in the 2007 Special Olympic Games in Shanghai.

Green councillors also sit on internal administrative committees of the Council, including Personnel Appeals and Pensions, and several cross party working groups, including Climate Change and School Rationalisation. Greens also have places on the boards of external companies that the council has an interest in, including Edinburgh & Lothian Greenspace Trust and Changeworks.

Green councillors have been taking forward proposals from the Edinburgh Green Party's local manifesto as well as seizing opportunities to influence the council agenda as they arise.

In the first year Green councillors have taken part in 11 full meetings of Edinburgh Council, proposing over 30 green policy initiatives and scores of amendments to other parties' proposals. Many of these have been successful, resulting in policy changes within the Council – some of which are highlighted in this report.

"May I commend the Green group for their amendments and their crucial support at this difficult time!"

UNISON EDINBURGH BRANCH

Green budgets

In February 2008, the Green Group produced its first ever budget which proposed to safeguard community interests and make the capital a pace-setter in meeting environmental challenges.

Greens also called for a review of the City's Budget process, looking at best practice across the country and moving towards the introduction of greater community participation.

Green casework

As well as proposing new City-wide initiatives, Green councillors have been working hard representing constituents in their wards. In the last year over 650 individual items of casework have been handled by Green councillors.

What constituents say

"Thank you for taking the time to respond. Your explanation is appreciated."

Highlights of Green Initiatives

Common good land

Greens have long been concerned about the sale of land held by the Council intended for the 'common good'. Following a serious concerns raised by land expert, Andy Wightman in June 2007, Greens got the council to agree that a review of the common good fund be updated as a matter of urgency and the results fully published and made available for public scrutiny before any further common good assets are disposed of.

What constituents say

'You have been a terrific help on this, and we are very grateful to you. A big part of the success of this whole thing was the fact that many of the elected representatives did what the people asked, and that was to listen to us. You were one of the first to do that, and you have our thanks.'

Empty Homes

Greens are greatly concerned about homelessness in the City and the lack of affordable homes. Following a Green proposal to full council in October 2007 calling for action to reduce the number of empty properties in the city, in March 2008 the Housing committee agreed a report outlining action on empty homes including targets and regular reporting of progress.

Park Green

The contribution of transport to climate change is one of the most significant and growing. So towards the end of last year, in a move to encourage the use of more climate friendly vehicles and discourage 'gas guzzlers' the Green Councillor Group on City of Edinburgh Council won backing for its proposal to revise parking charges according to vehicle carbon dioxide emissions. The measures were approved unanimously by the full City Council and City officials are presently preparing a report on how a scheme could be introduced. The report is likely to come back to council for approval in July and could see emissions reduced by 15% across the City.

Promoting cycling

Thanks to Green councillors, cars are to be banned from parking on The Mound every day of the week in a move designed to make journeys easier for bus passengers and cyclists. The ruling Lib Dem/SNP administration at the city council originally proposed painting double yellow lines on just a short stretch at the north end of the Mound, but performed a U-turn under pressure from Green councillors and cycling organisation Spokes.

Plastic bags

Greens called upon the Council to look into how Edinburgh could become the first Plastic Bag Free city in Scotland, following the lead of towns up and down the UK. Unfortunately, the City Administration deemed this too ambitious for Edinburgh, but smaller scale plans to work with local traders groups are bearing fruit and Leith, Marchmont and Tollcross now have their own cloth bag, promoting local businesses and reducing waste.

What constituents say

"Many thanks for your email. I appreciate the time you've taken to explain these key issues relating to the Local Plan."

Greening the Festivals

Following a motion tabled by the Greens, the City's great International Festivals will be required to report annually on their environmental progress. Information on resource use and recycling will be made available in December each year.

Sports stadia

Only Greens have opposed the Council's plan to sell the most valuable part of Meadowbank Sports Stadium in order to generate funds to build a mini-replacement. We have called for refurbishment of the complex in its entirety. Sale of public assets to fund rebuilds and maintenance projects isn't a viable long term plan. Scotland's health problems demand that we maximise sport and public recreational facilities. After all, ancient stadia across the world has been preserved and enhanced – Stockholm's 1912 stadium is somewhat older than Meadowbank and still going strong!

What constituents say

"Alison we love you and your colleagues - Thanks for trying"

Save Meadowbank Committee

"Thank you very much for your informed and quick response, I hope that we can indeed save Meadowbank as a sports facility as my two young boys make great use if it."

Schools

Greens rejected proposals to consult on the closure of 22 educational facilities. Worrying, the proposals suggested that the Education Committee hear from 8 schools in one day, a move which would have prohibited genuine consultation, allowing each school very little time to address Councillors.

Ward Reports

Three wards in the City currently are represented by Green Party Councillors. Here are reports from these wards.

Meadows/Morningside ward – Cllr. Alison Johnstone

In Meadows and Morningside Ward I was pleased to represent constituents on several planning issues, from the inappropriate extension of a nursing home in Craighouse, to overdevelopment of a villa site in Merchiston.

I have called for increased recycling collections in parts of Bruntsfield, but Bruntsfield is not alone in this need. Residents across the ward have rightly complained about the overflowing recycling bins they are faced with when 'doing their bit'. We need to divert resources from landfill and I have been in touch with recycling officers on several occasions pushing for improvements in this service.

I have thoroughly enjoyed chairing Meadows and Morningside Environmental Forum, which includes representatives from all local Community Councils, interested local residents, ward Councillors and City of Edinburgh officers. The group aims to improve the environment throughout the ward. A wide range of topics has been covered and the input from local residents and community councillors has been invaluable.

In Tollcross I spent time surveying Tollcross shoppers about the Council's performance and gained an insight into how local people feel their area could be improved. Concerns about traffic volume, litter collection and pavement maintenance were raised, alongside very positive comments about local shops and a feeling of community. Meadows and Morningside Greens intend surveying people throughout the ward and feed our findings into local Community Councils and the Neighbourhood Partnership.

Southside/Newington Ward – Cllr. Steve Burgess

My first year representing Southside/Newington ward has been very busy. People have raised scores of issues at my monthly surgeries and by e-mail, letter and phone. With Anne Goldstein the Green Group Business Manager, we handled over 260 'official' enquiries for help from constituents.

What constituents say

"Many thanks for getting this matter sorted, with my grateful thanks and those of the other residents."

I also started getting around all the different community groups in the ward and meeting the people active in these groups. There are over 30 groups meeting in the ward including three Community Councils, the management committees of the two Community Centres, three School Parent Councils as well as numerous residents associations.

Thankfully, Southside/Newington ward councillors have been able to co-ordinate our attendance at the meetings of these groups to ensure that all these groups are attended by at least one councillor so that no group, however small, misses out. This approach is so far unique in the Council – it will be interesting to see if other wards take up this approach.

Planning issues take up a large part of constituency business, with residents associations in Newington and the Grange keeping a watchful-eye on developments in their patch. As a member of the quasi-judicial Development Management Sub-Committee I can't take sides on a live planning application before it comes to committee for a decision but I can make sure that residents' objections are properly considered.

There has been one very controversial planning application in the Southside, the partial demolition of the former Odeon cinema and conversion to a hotel and bistro. I oppose this proposal because I don't think the possibilities to restore the Odeon as a venue have been fully explored.

One of the early ward successes was getting dropped kerb-stones put in at crossings for pushchairs and wheelchairs users along the length of Causewayside-Ratcliffe Terrace. This is a busy pedestrian route from the centre of the ward down to Newington Library and was blighted by very high kerbs difficult of impossible to negotiate for those with wheels.

It's been a worrying year for Community Centres in the ward, Southside and Cameron House in Prestonfield. Controversially the Council Administration cut the Community Learning and Development budget by half-a-million pounds and are reducing staff across the City. We just have to hope these cuts won't impact too badly on the facilities provided by community centres such as youth clubs and adult education classes.