



Council Leader's Report

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• EDINBURGH •
THE CITY OF EDINBURGH COUNCIL

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Returning to a 'new normal'

Recent weeks have brought with them a welcome, cautious return towards normality with the gradual lifting of lockdown restrictions. Whether it's grandparents being able to hug their grandchildren, friends enjoying dinner in each other's company or a long-awaited trip to the hairdresser, I know people across the city will be relishing these new-found freedoms.

Of course, we know that these freedoms depend on us all sticking to the rules, helping to limit the spread of the virus by following guidance. Our beautiful parks and beaches have been a haven for all those enjoying fresh air, exercise and socialising as restrictions have been eased, and we want that to continue. Just this month [we reopened some public toilets in remote, high footfall locations to ease local pressures](#), but we still need people to be respectful and plan ahead when they're out and about.

It's fantastic to see so many small businesses reopening to the public too and we're doing everything we can to help them with advice, support and access to funding. In fact, [we've already administered over £112m in grants to more than 9,000 businesses](#), which has been a lifeline to many during lockdown. Our licensing officers are pulling out all the stops to help process applications for outdoor seating quickly, while the Spaces for People team are looking at ways of creating more room on our streets for people to spend time sampling all their local shops, cafés and restaurants have to offer.

These have, of course, been testing times for our high streets, but the atmosphere is gradually changing into one of hope. In the private sector, it's encouraging to hear that so many developers are still committed to pushing forward with their projects – such as the much-anticipated St James Centre, the £150m Johnnie Walker Experience on the old House of Fraser site, and now Legal & General's announcement this week for a £50m conversion of the iconic Debenhams building into a hotel with a rooftop bar, spa and space for shops.

Clearly major projects such as these will be a key part of Edinburgh's recovery, attracting people from near and far back into the city and supporting the economy and creating jobs by doing so. This will be crucial in the aftermath of the pandemic when job insecurity will be on many people's minds. That's why we're taking steps to boost support for those at risk of unemployment through our welfare services but also directly with employers. As part of this, we plan to [expand our Edinburgh Guarantee offer](#) to those facing the greatest disadvantages to securing employment, training or education and we're calling on key employers to help us make sure we build Edinburgh's economy back up in a fair and inclusive way.

Walking, cycling and wheeling out of lockdown

One of the ways we're helping residents to adapt to the 'new normal' is through our ambitious Spaces for People programme – a major project which has already seen a raft of significant changes made across the city to help people walk, cycle and wheel safely as lockdown restrictions are eased.

From pedestrianised areas leading to parks and beaches to segregated cycle lanes serving our main hospitals, these measures have been well received, creating extra space for people to make journeys, visit businesses and exercise while observing physical distancing. Over the coming months, when we expect traffic to increase, we'll be installing more than 30km of segregated cycleways and widening pavements across the city to help people returning to work to travel on foot or by bike. Soon we'll be looking at routes to schools, to make journeys for pupils and families safer come August.

[Our recent call for suggestions attracted more than 4,100 comments and ideas](#), which will help us to identify further trends as well as flagging up new areas for improvement. We know how important it is to make these changes quickly and our teams are working as hard as they can, with limited resources, to implement improvements that work.

Promoting a green recovery

To ensure we continue to meet our environmental obligations for Edinburgh, as a city and an economy, we need a green recovery which will make us more resilient to future shocks. We need to take the same approach that we did with the pandemic and remind ourselves of what worked: strong, decisive leadership; fast-paced action; and a unified approach to success – bringing residents, businesses and all levels of government together to tackle this issue head on.

There's lots already underway to make our city and our recovery greener – like transforming streets for people and extending the Tram to Newhaven, and now boasting the [UK's first eco-powered green space over at Saughton Park](#). Going forward, we'll also use the Edinburgh Climate Commission's recommendations as guiding principles for [our vision of the city as a green, thriving and fair one](#).

Taking inspiration from the [10 pandemic recovery recommendations](#) outlined by the Commission earlier this month, we can accelerate our responses to the two crises, ensuring that the moves we make now benefit our city in the long term.

New sign-up window for garden waste service

Those with green fingers will be happy to hear that [registration for the garden waste service opens again on 30 July](#), with customers able to renew their permits or sign up for one before 2pm on 9 September at £25 a year for fortnightly collections.

The current service year for brown bin collections was due to end on 4 October, but we're extending permits so they're valid until 8 November to compensate for the loss of service during spring, when we needed to suspend collections due to the pandemic.

Since last October, garden waste customers have helped us turn nearly 10,000 tonnes of garden waste into compost, which is used on farms, gardens and green spaces, so I'm pleased to see the service up and running with the chance for people to renew their permits.

Count down to the new school term

It was encouraging to hear the Education Secretary reaffirm last week that there's no need for physical distancing for our pupils when they return to school full time in August. Obviously, this will rely on the virus continuing to be suppressed over the coming weeks but I'm sure parents will be relieved to hear we're on track for a 100% return.

At the end of the day, we all have the same desire to see all our children and young people back in school where they need to be. [We're making sure everything possible is being done to ensure they're safe to reopen](#), following the most up-to-date advice from the Scottish Government and other agencies.

Thanks to an enormous amount of work by our teaching staff and other council teams, we'll also have robust contingency plans in place should they be required – but very much hope our efforts and the public health guidance will allow a 100% return.

A different kind of Edinburgh in August

This week we would normally be preparing to welcome the world to our festival stage and, despite life gradually returning to the city, this will clearly be a very different August for us all.

It doesn't mean there's nothing going on though – our Festivals were born out of the ashes of WW2 and this spirit of innovation and resilience is shining through again. For example, from tomorrow (23 July) the Edinburgh Jazz & Blues Festival will mark the dates of its 43rd event by presenting a [four-day online Festival](#). Meanwhile, the Edinburgh Art Festival has [invited ten artists from previous festival editions](#) to digitally mark the dates of what would have been their 2020 showcase. And, of course, we're doing all we can to re-open our many cultural offerings as soon and as safely as we can, for all to enjoy once more.

The absence of the festivals will, of course, impact our City in many ways – not least our hospitality, tourism and retail sectors. [We're working with our partners from Edinburgh Tourism Action Group and across the sector to do everything we can to help the local businesses that tourism supports in their own recovery](#), and with that, building a more sustainable Edinburgh for the future.

We're also having positive discussions on how Edinburgh's Christmas and Hogmanay could be celebrated this year. Everyone recognises the uncertainty of the current situation and the significant requirements for anything Edinburgh hosts to meet public health guidance. It's clear that if our 2020 Winter Festivals go ahead, they will look very different from recent years, using different locations across the City. Any events should be designed to give our residents a truly Edinburgh experience while supporting our fantastic local business who operate all year round – particularly those that have been impacted by the lockdown.

Work is underway with our partners to further investigate the feasibility of these new proposals and Councillors will agree a way forward in the coming weeks.

Consigning racism and prejudice to history

Last week, [we installed temporary signs displaying our newly-agreed wording for the plaque at the Melville Monument](#). These signs will be in place for the next 6-8 weeks while a permanent plaque is created and goes through the necessary planning and listed building consent process.

It's important that we can all gain a better understanding of Edinburgh's history and, in particular, a more honest acknowledgement of our City's role in the slave trade. By more accurately reflecting our past we can address the lingering racism that still haunts our society and which must be stamped out. The voices of ethnic minority residents are key to that progress.

This week's Policy and Sustainability Committee will discuss a way forward in tackling racism, supporting diversity and promoting equality in schools, as well as looking at issues across the entire city. In consultation with the BAME community, we'll consider all options for how we more accurately tell Edinburgh's history and our city's role in the slave trade, ensuring our streets and monuments are appropriate and in the proper context.

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