



Council Leader's Report

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Let's get through this together

As Scotland's [COVID vaccination programme](#) continues, tens of thousands of vulnerable residents, frontline workers and people over 80 will have now received their first vaccine dose. Monday (1 February) sees the opening of the region's first mass vaccination centre at the EICC. Together with others set to open across the Lothians, the venue will be central to the roll-out of vaccinations to the broader population and, eventually, to helping us all return to some sense of normality.

Of course, we must continue to work together and stick to the rules to beat this virus – many of the restrictions in place will remain with us for some time yet. I know our residents and businesses have sacrificed a lot to observe the guidance, and I'd like to thank them for helping to limit transmissions and protect our community. I'd also like to thank all the parents and carers juggling work with homeschooling just now, and I'm sure our teachers will feel an elevated respect for their profession when our young people return to school.

We're doing everything we can to deliver Council services with minimum disruption, including providing free school meals and supporting businesses to adjust to changes. If we can keep up this collective effort, I know we can get through this together.

Our city's resilience was highlighted recently with the publication of a [Good Growth report](#) by PwC and think-tank Demos. Their analysis demonstrated Edinburgh's economy as faring the best out of the UK's cities during the pandemic, pointing to our mix of sectors and relatively low case rate.

Planning for a greener, fairer Edinburgh

This week we published a [new three-year Business Plan](#) based on our key priorities of tackling poverty and inequality, boosting sustainability and enhancing wellbeing for all citizens.

The Business Plan aligns to a proposed four-year budget framework that we'll debate as a Council on 18 February, along with a proposed one-year balanced budget for 2021/22. We'll be carefully assessing how the Local Government Financial Settlement will affect our draft budget and the Finance and Resources Committee will receive an update from officers on Tuesday (2 February) once the full details of Edinburgh's allocation are known.

We know there are some tough decisions ahead of us, but guided by the priorities our residents have told us they value most and by the [aims set out in the Edinburgh Community Plan](#), we'll make sure we put the best interests of our communities, our places and the planet at the heart of everything we do.

Looking forward to a healthy, active and sustainable future

Lockdown has demonstrated a real appetite – and need – to get outside and walk, cycle or wheel every day, whether it's to take a breath of fresh air or to make an essential journey to work or to care for someone. We've responded to this through our [Spaces for People programme](#), installing or developing designs for 39km of pop-up cycle lanes, widening footpaths in 11 shopping streets and introducing safety measures at 54 schools to help people get around safely while physically distancing.

The team is still hard at work progressing more schemes to address pinch points, including measures based on your suggestions through our [Commonplace consultation](#). In the coming weeks, we'll be introducing segregated cycle lanes and lowering speed limits on Lanark Road and Longstone Road to provide a much-needed safe cycling and walking route, while helping to relieve congestion on the Union Canal towpath and Water of Leith Walkway – together with many more changes, such as the addition of protected cycle lanes and pedestrian improvements on Minto Street. We've made every effort to listen to residents and businesses throughout this process, amending designs as and when required.

We're now thinking about how some of these measures could deliver benefits beyond the end of the pandemic. We'll soon be launching a consultation to find out which Spaces for People improvements people have gained the most from, and where they would like to see changes retained – helping us towards a healthier, more active and environmentally friendly future for the city.

Two new Local Nature Reserves for Edinburgh

Our public parks and greenspaces have proven to be real havens for us all this past year – and it's vital we preserve them for future generations to enjoy too. It's brilliant news, then, that Wester Craiglockhart Hill and Little France Park are both set to become Local Nature Reserves after [plans were approved](#) this week.

Covering over 55 hectares of unspoilt land in the Capital, the two sites have been recognised as areas of high natural heritage interest. Not only will they be protected, they will be managed and improved with the conservation of nature as a priority. Their new status ensures that the land, wildlife habitats and eco-systems are looked after for everyone to enjoy for many years to come.

New chapter for the Book Festival

This week the [Edinburgh International Book Festival](#) announced that, from August, the festival will be held at the University of Edinburgh's Edinburgh College of Art on Lauriston Place, bringing to an end the festival's 37-year residency in Charlotte Square.

As the world's first City of Literature, we know how much Edinburgh's booklovers and visitors from across the globe enjoy the festival each year. Its new home at the art college provides excellent studio and theatre facilities for both online broadcasting and potential events with a physically distanced audience. Full programme details are due to be announced in June.

Culture and the arts are in Edinburgh's DNA but 2020 was extremely tough for our festivals and events sector. We pledged our support, particularly through our funding programmes, to the retention and, as far as possible, stability of the sector and we continue to work with all our event and cultural partners with the shared aim of securing their future and to see their return as safely and as quickly as possible.

Old Royal High School, new opportunities

Earlier this month, our Finance and Resources Committee unanimously agreed to remarket the Old Royal High School, enabling us to identify the best value option for the city and our residents. I'm pleased we now have a way ahead and, with a report on next steps due back to committee in May, we can begin the process of giving this iconic building a new lease of life.

Addressing the problem of short term lets

Last month I updated you on the introduction of regulation for short term lets following our successful campaign on this major issue for the Capital. And I'm delighted that, subject to Parliamentary approval, new legislation for a licensing regime and control zones will be introduced on 1 April.

I'm very clear that this is the best way forward. Planning enforcement is lengthy and time consuming but it's still great news that we've had [four appeals upheld by the Scottish Government](#) this month. This means that four more properties will now remain as residential homes in the future. Short term lets have reduced the city's housing stock and caused a range of issues in our communities so this can only be a good thing for our residents.

Earlier this week, it was reported that a [downturn in rental prices in Edinburgh](#) was in part down to the conversion of many short term let properties moving back to long term lets, making rents more affordable. This demonstrates our Council's policies are the right ones for the people of Edinburgh.

Winter weather responders

When temperatures drop, our roads team works extremely hard – often around the clock – gritting the city's 1,445km of [priority pavements, cycle lanes and roads](#) leading to key services like hospitals and police stations, as well as bus routes.

This effort can be in the face of freezing rain, snow or sustained sub-zero temperatures meaning a non-stop battle with the elements just to keep these essential routes open and safe, before local streets can be treated. As well as our fleet of lorries and 16 new mini tractors, the team has been making use of three additional tractors to help treat the many new cycleways and widened pavements introduced through Spaces for People.

So, it's a big thank you to our roads team – and to the paid volunteers who provide extra help treating the city's streets where needed. I'd also like to thank those residents who kept their own street clear – they've made all the difference this winter.

I want to end by acknowledging the huge effort and commitment being shown by our colleagues right across the Council. From the waste operatives collecting Christmas trees and the homecare workers visiting those in need, to the schools transport support teams helping to deliver vaccines to care homes, and the teachers supporting vulnerable children and the children of key workers – I'm so grateful for their hard work in keeping our Capital going.

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