



# Council Leader's Report

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• EDINBURGH •  
THE CITY OF EDINBURGH COUNCIL

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## ***We stand in solidarity with Ukraine***

Tragically, we are once again witnessing the horrors of war in Europe. Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine hits very close to home. Not just because of the proximity of this war, but because of the family and civic connections between our nations and, in particular, between Edinburgh and our twin city Kyiv.

We have all witnessed the heart-breaking stories of loss and families torn apart; but also of the great bravery and resistance by the people of Ukraine. We have also seen a characteristically caring and generous response from people across Edinburgh, with countless individuals and organisations coming forward with offers of support, donations and solidarity.

Following the [city summit](#) I hosted last week with the Depute Leader, the Acting Consul General for Ukraine and local community leaders, we are today setting out a series of actions that we intend to take. We're standing with all Councillors in condemning Putin's tyranny and plan to award the Freedom of the City of Edinburgh to the President of Ukraine and Mayor of Kyiv.

With members' agreement, we'll also write to the Home Office encouraging unrestricted refugee visas and local working to source host families to house refugees, with a focus on those most able to support unaccompanied children. We also plan to write to the MOD to request access to unused temporary accommodation for those travelling to Edinburgh from Kyiv, and to provide £100,000 in Council funding to help coordinate local humanitarian aid.

We're all democrats standing with our Ukrainian friends and against Putin's regime and, as the Ukrainian flag continues to fly above the City Chambers, I hope our plans receive all-party agreement from Council. But, more than that, I hope that this murderous and illegal war is brought to a swift end.

## ***Making our commitments count***

Throughout the pandemic, we've demonstrated incredible resilience as a Council and as a City, pulling together to support those most in need of our help. As life finally – and thankfully – starts to return to normal, we'll continue to safeguard our frontline services and focus on getting everything back up and running. But the challenges remain: our businesses have suffered with lockdown after lockdown, households are struggling with rising fuel bills and we're still counting the cost of Covid.

That's why the [£1bn Council Budget](#) we set last month was designed to support residents through the cost-of-living crisis while investing in local communities, and why we'll be directing millions of pounds towards shaping a more sustainable, fair and thriving future for Edinburgh.

We've already made real progress towards tackling these challenges. This is clear to see from our [Coalition Commitments progress update](#) and I'm proud that, despite the unforeseen challenges this Council has faced, we're on track to achieve the vast majority of our 52 commitments.

We've opened and are constructing eight new schools, improved access to music, language and STEM skills and increased the number of classroom assistants for children with additional needs.

We've completed the build of the new Meadowbank Sports Centre and delivered fantastic new biking and other facilities at Hunters Hall Park. We're on track to take Trams to Newhaven and have invested more than £112m in our roads and pavements and £25m on enhancing our cycling infrastructure.

We're developing and building thousands of new low-carbon, affordable homes to cope with our housing pressures and, only last week, took another three significant strides towards our ambitious target by agreeing contracts for [Granton](#), [Pennywell and Muirhouse](#) and [Meadowbank](#). And we remain on target to become a Million Tree city, having planted over 50,000 trees, and we boast more Green Flag parks than anywhere else in Scotland.

While Covid has obviously limited our progress in some areas, the improvements delivered over the last five years have not only kept Edinburgh as a successful city, but a fairer, greener and healthier one too.

## ***Painting a picture of a resilient, positive city***

It was refreshing to learn that Capital residents are some of the most content in the UK, according to the 15<sup>th</sup> annual [Edinburgh By Numbers](#) report published earlier this week.

When polled last year, our residents scored higher than average for personal wellbeing – including life satisfaction and feeling happy. Alongside evidence of a highly educated and more active workforce than other major UK cities and above average wages, the latest data also points to Edinburgh being one of the UK's most economically strong cities, despite Covid.

Our city is still growing at a rate of three times the national average, highlighting Edinburgh's popularity as a place to live and work, but also the need for us to keep investing in public transport, more affordable housing, schools and other vital services. Our residential population has increased by more than 10% in a decade and this isn't likely to slow down.

Current issues aside, and despite polls being conducted during the pandemic, these results paint a picture of an extremely resilient and positive city; one well placed to continue its economic and cultural recovery.

## ***A new dawn for Princes Street and our city centre***

If you haven't visited the city centre for a while, you'll notice a great deal of change. A transformation that started before the pandemic to mirror changing shopping habits and how we use our local high streets.

The opening of the new St James Quarter to the East and the Johnnie Walker Experience in the West have made an exciting, and positive contribution to Princes Street's changing landscape. It's testament to the Street's enduring appeal that major landmark projects such as these are coming to fruition.

We're seeing more of the same with some of our most iconic buildings enjoying a new lease of life. Major investment is being made to convert former retail stores Jenners, Debenhams, Gap, Topshop and BHS. These will be followed by the creation of the new Dunard Centre concert hall in St Andrew Square. All this, together with the pre-pandemic openings at New Waverley and St Andrew Square, represents a real vote of confidence by both investors and us, as residents and consumers in our city centre.

There's no question that it's been a difficult time for business – nobody should underestimate that. We've worked closely with local businesses who've felt the brunt of lockdowns and lost income to support them through ongoing financial support, now amounting to over £263million and driving awareness, and footfall through our [ForeverEdinburgh](#) visitor campaigns and [Resident Rewards](#).

## ***Pushing for powers to regulate short term lets***

We're making great headway in our call for greater powers to regulate short term lets (STLs).

Last month, [following committee approval](#), we wrote to the Scottish Government asking for the whole of Edinburgh to become a control area. If the Government agrees, residential property owners letting out their entire property would need to apply for planning permission for a 'change of use'. Generally, renting out a room(s) in your own home or letting it out while you're on holiday would still be permitted.

[The Scottish Parliament has also approved legislation](#) for local authorities to implement a licensing scheme and a report on how this will work here will be considered by Councillors later this month.

These new powers, and the huge amount of work we're putting in to securing them, are hugely important. We know STLs cause many of our residents a lot of issues, such as noise and anti-social behaviour. They also push up rents and house prices and take homes out of the city's housing supply.

## ***Sustaining the success of our Winter Festivals***

The [search for the next producers of our Winter Festivals](#) is underway, with the specifications for future events shaped by the outcomes of the major independent survey we carried out last year.

Overall, it was clear that there was overwhelming support for the continuation of Christmas and Hogmanay celebrations in the Capital, but with a revised format. Key things going forward will be to extend celebrations to other parts of the city, sustainability – including minimising use of greenspace – and improving access for those previously less able to participate.

I'm confident that by acting on residents' feedback, we will remain the home of Hogmanay and ensure our Christmas events, enjoyed by so many across the City, continue in a way that balances residents' needs and aspirations for how they should look and feel in future.

And as we look forward to a new and exciting year of Festivals, I want to congratulate Nicola Benedetti on her appointment as the next Festival Director of Edinburgh International Festival. In taking the role, she will be both the first Scottish and the first female Director since the Festival began in 1947 and I wish her every success in her new post.

## ***Counting down to Council elections***

As we continue the countdown to the next Local Government Election on 5 May, now is the time to think about how you'll be voting and [making sure you're registered to vote](#).

You have a range of options for casting your ballot – in person, by post or by appointing someone you trust to vote in your place, known as a proxy. The deadline to register to vote is midnight on 18 April and to [apply for a postal vote](#), the deadline is 5pm on 19 April. [Further information is available from our website](#).

This is my final Leader's Report of this Council term and, while we may not always agree, I would like to pay tribute to my fellow councillors from across the political divide for their hard work and support over the past five years. Many of us are standing again, but several are leaving the Council and I'd like to thank those who have given dedicated service to their constituents and to their city. They leave with our best wishes.

Thank you for reading.

## ***Get involved***

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