

**Notes for EACC Question Time, Saturday 24th September 2011,
City Chambers, 10am to 12 noon.**

On the panel were:

Chief Executive, City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) , Sue Bruce.

Director of Services for Communities, CEC, Mark Turley.

The Chairman introduced Sue Bruce by noting that as Chief Executive of Edinburgh Council, Sue is responsible for managing the second largest council in Scotland and the eighth largest unitary council in the United Kingdom. She is the senior officer who leads and is accountable for the over 17,000 paid staff of the Council, who run the local authority on a day to day basis.

Referring to her personal profile, the Chair noted that Sue started work in local government in 1976, beginning her career in the education field. She was appointed to the Director role in East Dunbartonshire covering Education, Social Work, Housing and Cultural Services in 2000 and then Chief Executive in 2004. Before joining CEC, Sue was the chief Executive of Aberdeen City Council from December 2008, where she focused on the complete restructuring of services and a review of service performance, governance, accountability, and financial performance. The Council satisfied the requirements of audit and inspection bodies in July 2009 resulting in the removal of special measures status.

Sue began her address to the approximately 40 CCllrs present by remarking that the event provided her with an opportunity to relate to CCs and strengthen the Council's links with them. She said that to some extent the statutory element has been forgotten. She said that she prefers not to think in terms of a hierarchy. When first coming into Edinburgh she was asked what were her priorities as Chief Executive. Clearly the Budget and the issue of the Trams were important, but her ~~single most campaigning position over-riding concern~~ is to address the matter of youth unemployment in the city. Edinburgh ranks 32nd out of 326 local authorities in terms of school leavers having a positive destination (ie employment, education or training) helping school leavers to find employment. As of January this year, more than 500 of last year's 3,000 school leavers had found no such opportunities for employment. Now a range of businesses, led by the Council are developing 'The Edinburgh Guarantee' and 250 opportunities have been worked up so far. This is an example of one of the ways in which we serve the residents of this city.

In that role of serving the city, it is incumbent on the Council to listen to what people are saying. She said that if they can therefore develop a strong relationship with CCs, then we will do that.

Referring to the recent BBC television programme about alleged malpractice within the property repairs department of CEC, Sue said all that was revealed by that programme was already known to the Council, and an indepent inquiry was well underway along with a separate Police investigation that the former Chief Executive of the Council had already launched a forensic enquiry into the matter prior to Sue taking up her post. Mark Turley noted that the investigation is being monitored very carefully, it is expected that charges will be pressed in due course.

Referring to her success in working with Aberdeen's deficit of £100m, Sue said that she believes that every problem has a solution. She said that by January 2009 the Council had achieved a financial and cultural turnaround and satisfied the auditors, turning the deficit into a profit, the fastest turnaround that she had achieved in any job. By Spring of this year, Aberdeen Council was rated by Audit Scotland as an example of good practice.

Sue said that this is leadership, combined with managerial and administrative efficiency. She said: "If we as a group of professionals have an idea, we can influence peoples' lives for years to come." She emphasized the role of those who work for the Council is as public servants, and the privilege of that role. In a climate of support and challenge, she said that it is appropriate that the public should be reviewing what the Council is doing.

Mark Turley noted that the last nine months have been 'fast'. With regard to the investigation into the property department, he said that the Property Conservation his branch of the Council now falls within the remit of Services for Communities, and that his department will be honest and transparent once they know what has happened.

Repaying Council borrowing

Question from New Town: We have been told that £231m has recently been taken up in borrowing for the tram project and this will have to be repaid with interest. This will mean £30m per year for the next 30 years. Can we have an assurance that this will not have a lasting and detrimental effect on the delivery of services?

Ans: The money allocated to the tram project came largely from Transport Scotland – ie the Scottish Government. The Council will have to make a bigger contribution than was originally anticipated but most of this has already been provided for by the previous Director of Finance before he retired. was separate from the budget that is allocated to Services for Communities. The additional allocation to the tram programme for us will be £5m per annum and we will have to borrow that. It is important that we are transparent about what we are borrowing and what it is for, and this we will be. We are nationally in a difficult position and it is too early to say what the impact of the government's spending policy will be

Comment from New Town: Our roads are a disgrace compared with some of the excellent roads in the rest of Europe. We are far behind in both construction and repair of our current roads and highways.

Ans: There's a discussion to be had about how we reduce the amount of resource we take up for bureaucracy. We need to stop being pen-pushers for the sake of it.

Mark Turley said that roads are the responsibility of Services for Communities. He said that in 2006, in a typical year the Council spent £3m on roads -- there wasn't the appetite for maintaining the road network. By 2010, that £3m had gone up to £20m.

In 2006, 50% of the network was in need of repair. But by 2010, that figure had reduced to about 30% ~~one third of those repairs had been achieved~~, so some progress is being made. Surveys do reflect customer satisfaction with this progress.

Sue noted that we have had two bad winters and a wet summer which contribute to the degrading of the surfaces. Unlike some cities which are built on solid rock, Edinburgh's roads are better compared to a sponge. There are also many utilities

beneath the roads. Both these factors have to be taken into account and balanced against each other.

Privatisation

Old Town comment: We have concerns about the privatisation proposals. There has been no debate about what the public wants. What will happen when the council's services finish? Won't it be more difficult to enforce accountability?

Ans: We run a business here with a revenue turnover of £1bn per annum. We do have a duty of care, but it is also a business. We value our employees, but we also have a duty of care to the people of Edinburgh. In October we will have an update. The Council will take a view about to what extent we go forward. We have to ask ourselves if we can deliver a better level of service if we release resource that can be better used elsewhere. Some services should remain, like the protection of the vulnerable. In other areas we need to change our culture. We are aiming for a good consistent level of service.

Comment from Merchiston: We need a tight mechanism for accountability. How can we get the elected members to hold the allocated contracts to account?

Ans: We are reviewing our performance standards mechanism for accountability. They need to be robust and resilient.

Support for poorer communities

Comment from Craigmillar: We don't feel that we are involved in community engagement anymore. When the Fairer Scotland Fund was disbanded, we were promised influence over the £80m that would be allocated in its place to support impoverished areas and communities. We are not getting the information or dialogue that we need about how this is to be moved forward.

Ans: (Mark) There hasn't been the follow-through that there should have been on this. I do give an undertaking that there will be better engagement on this matter.

Sue: This raises the question of how do we get information out about how the money is spent?

Comment from Morningside: We are at a crossroads and we do need a new broom. There are some cultural ideas that need changing and some attitudes within community councils that also need review. Yet CC sub-committees can achieve some very good work and we know what they need.

Ans: (Sue) Yes we need to declutter the landscape and ensure a good flow of information. We have a direct responsibility to the public regarding releasing information. I would be happy for spreadsheets, detailing what is spent where, being made available to community councils.

Property repairs

Gorgy/Dalry question: What support is there for residents wanting to get repairs done to their properties now?

Ans: (Mark) ~~Tenant associations can offer support for shared properties.~~ We currently have over 300 complaints about different property problems. But we do not

yet know which companies or employees we can trust. If we place contracts now, we may be perpetuating the problems. But we hope that following a report to Council in October we will be in a position to commission more work.

Chair of Merchiston response: Provision to the 2003 Tenement Bill was a reform of the Scottish common law of the tenement. It does not relate to tenants, but to owner-occupiers of tenement flats, but the definition of 'tenement' is quite wide, being shared parts of a common structure.

This was intended as a much needed reform and gave co-owners the right to pursue other owners for their share of repairs in the Sheriff Court provided the co-owners had established themselves into a Stair Association (with constitution, Secretary, Chair, etc.) and that they had a majority in favour of the said repair. Previously the law required unanimity.

However, legal process is expensive - and uncertain. Even if it goes in your favour, getting actual money out of absconders can be really difficult. They will 'disappear' and leave the country. The police won't pursue them. Twenty-five per cent of all dwellings in Scotland are 'tenements'. It has been reported that the cityCouncil has a backlog of £14.5bn in unpaid common repairs.

The Edinburgh Guarantee

Morningside Question: Re The Edinburgh Guarantee -- how do you plan to make this sustainable?

Ans: Though business sectors may be competing in some areas, businesses are also working together to address the problem of youth unemployment in the city. While there is a cross-over period, by working together with Edinburgh businesses, we have opened a huge recipe for opportunity that will be sustainable. So – it is sustainable because it is not wholly dependent on Council funding.

Information sharing

New Town comment: We welcome your goal of sharing information. The council culture has been 'we will be selective in what we release'.

Ans: It is our responsibility to present information in a style that the public can understand. Regarding the property matters, the police have been involved since 2010. A further investigation has been launched this year and Mark is leading this.

Neighbourhood Partnerships

Morningside comment: You seem to believe in democracy, but we don't have a positive experience of Neighbourhood Partnerships. (Nps). People don't seem to be interested in community involvement anymore..

Ans: Neighbourhood Partnerships are bodies delivering services that can release information and in turn be advised by the public. With NPs we do have an opportunity to build on what already exists. . I encourage the release of information.

Cramond comment: We are told that Nps know the areas in which they are working. But this is not the reality -- they don't know them. It's Ccs that know their areas and it's Ccs that should be consulted when making important and spending decisions in their areas.

Fairmilehead comment: The NP works well in Pentland and the sub-groups do enable

the public to comment on matters that affect the local community, like health and employability for example, which comes under the remit of one sub-group. Engagement in this area is done via the sub-groups and it works well.

Ans: Perhaps we could look at the Pentland NP as an example of good practice.

Fairmilehead comment: It is true that some departments of the Council don't want to engage.

Ans: (Sue) I don't subscribe to a faceless bureaucracy. It is not our place to be stand offish. We need to dig around that thinking as the cultural change that is going on continues.

Merchiston: It is refreshing to hear that there is a new broom sweeping through council practice. A concern is however that the post of financial director has been abolished. Surely there should be a qualified financial director reporting directly to the chief executive?

Ans: The ~~six~~five directorships have been reduced to ~~five~~three and the duties of the new Director of Corporate Governance~~corporate manager~~, who comes with a legal background, will include those of financial director. He will report directly to me. I uphold the need for a chief financial officer.

Grange/Prestonfield: The changes that are occurring in the level of community engagement are very concerning to community representatives. There have been big changes in how the Nps are run. Nps appear to be making decisions without consulting the public via community representatives. Meetings are also being hi-jacked by local authority councillors.

Morningside: Community representatives are not getting the support they need from senior council officials. It is also so easy for obstructive people to get on to community councils. Similarly Nps used to be open meetings, but this is now no longer the case. There is no allowance for debate.

Chair of Morningside: This could be explained by a decision taken to replace some of the South Central public meetings either with business meetings, which the public may attend but not ask questions of the board, or themed meetings which have proved great fun. These have focused on a theme such as issues affecting older people and there has been no opposition to this kind of debate.

Craigmillar: When Nps were set up there was talk of 'empowerment' and it was said that this is why they were set up. There isn't always the level of empowerment that was suggested. You would get a very different level of community engagement if Nps had a significant budget to deliver.

Ans: It's about a change in the balance between state bodies and the community. I need to remain rooted in the beginnings of my career, which was in community-based work. We want to be doing things that are useful to you. There is a useful discussion to be had around this issue.

Planning

New Town comment: When Ccs make submissions on planning applications, some of which take a huge amount of work, they are not acknowledged, and more often than not completely disregarded. It's as if we don't exist.

Craigleith/Blackhall: Generally no account is given to CC objections

Leith Harbour and Newhaven: Ccs seem to have been sidelined

Morningside: CC objections are not given any more weight than that of an individual

resident.

Ans: That sort of response is disrespectful. As statutory bodies it is expected that your views should have some sort of influence. There should be a standing paragraph in the planning guidelines for statutory consultees. Ccs are statutory consultees on Licensing and Planning and this should be taken seriously. Planning is not a faceless bureaucracy. SEPA would be taken seriously as would Historic Scotland.

New Town: How can we ensure that weight is given to a well-researched submission?

Ans: There are a range of things that can be done. We need clarity re the weight carried by Ccs on planning submissions. We could also set up a meeting with SESPLAN, which provides an over-arching strategic development plan for the whole area.

Conclusion: The Chair warmly thanked Sue Bruce and Mark Turley for their attendance. Sue noted that the dialogue had been informative and fruitful and looked forward to further engagement with Ccs in Edinburgh in the future.