

Living Streets Edinburgh Group: Convenor's report 2024

This report covers the period since our last AGM - November 2022 - so is little more than a year. As usual, our annual reflections are a mixture of progress and also frustrations. But for a small, entirely voluntary group, we can be assured that we're making a positive difference to the city!

An obvious highlight has been our influence on the pavement parking ban. The national ban - including parking at dropped kerbs and double parking - finally became law in December 2023 - more than 4 years after it was approved as part of the the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019.

Edinburgh has been the first, and best, council in implementing the provisions, from January this year: it has exempted no streets and has had a well-planned enforcement strategy. Many streets which have been parked on for years or even decades are now free for pedestrians. The incidence of 'just for a minute' parking also appears to have reduced significantly (despite serious loopholes in the national legislation).

We claim a significant degree of credit for encouraging the Council to adopt this approach: indeed, a deputation by Hilda Sim and myself in November 2022 secured unanimous, cross-party in-principle support for the 'no-exemptions' position and we believe that this set the tone for the Council's approach.

Another success with regard to parking was our lobbying Transport Scotland for the cost of a fixed penalty notice to increase - which absurdly had remained the same (£60) for more than 20 years. Despite initial reluctance, the Scottish Government agreed to update the cost of the penalty to £100 with effect from 1 April 2023. This will act as a better deterrent to antisocial parking and also raise more funds for councils to spend on positive transport policies (parking fine income is ring-fenced for this purpose).

Edinburgh's transport strategy is continuing to evolve and we are very pleased to see that commitments to make the city better for 'walking and wheeling', the apex of the 'sustainable travel hierarchy', are central. We organised a well-attended webinar on 'Our Future Streets' attended by Cllr Arthur and Daisy Narayanan in March 2024. There is still a lot more engagement required before these plans are firmed up - what changes will be needed to which streets? - but we firmly support the thrust of Council policy: that we must achieve a shift away from motor traffic to public transport, cycling and of course walking and wheeling. Plans to remove all, or most, traffic from streets like the Canongate and Cowgate are long overdue. None of this will be easy.

The council strategy has many related components - the Low Emission Zone (finally becoming active in June); the Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (Leith, Corstorphine); the emerging '20 minute neighbourhood' plans (Portobello, Craigmillar and Dalry); major active travel schemes like 'Meadows to George Street' and the redesign of George Street itself. All of these need our influence to bear: public space is contested and all too easily,

as we saw in Leith Walk, we need to be vigilant to make sure that pedestrians' interests are properly defended and advanced.

Reducing traffic is however only part of the solution to make Edinburgh a better city for walking: we must also improve the pedestrian experience and infrastructure, and a lot of our efforts are aligned to this effect. It is rewarding to see evidence finally mounting that the Council's Street Design Guidance is influencing road schemes to the benefit of pedestrians - for example improvement to Lothian Road/Fountainbridge, London Road and Morrison Street/Gardners Crescent. Again, we've engaged extensively with engineers on these street designs and want to do more of this.

However, it must also be said that still far too often, pro-walking policy statements aren't matched in practice. Many of the walking elements of the Active Travel Plan have either been delayed for years (Leslie Place/Deanhaugh Street signals in Stockbridge) or abandoned (Calton Road pavement improvements). We have seen some remaining temporary 'Spaces for People' pavements removed to accommodate new car parking (Viewforth). The Council has succeeded in attracting significant investment for major 'active travel' schemes such as the City Centre West East Link, but too often the benefits of these schemes to pedestrians are very limited. Sometimes they actually reduce space for walking (Haymarket Terrace) or introduce new difficulties like floating bus stops.

We would like to see much more emphasis on prosaic but important improvement to everyday walking in residential areas rather than on expensive, over-engineered flagship schemes, often in the city centre. We have been promised a new focus on maintaining footways, tackling pavement clutter, installing dropped kerbs and improved pedestrian crossings as part of the new Active Travel Plan, but have yet to see much sign of this in practice. We have established valuable links with important technical council staff in road design, traffic signals (including hosting an online seminar) and road safety; our investment in these relations is every bit as important as with the active travel function.

Turning to LSEG itself, we need to continually reflect on how we can best work as a small, unfunded group entirely reliant on volunteer effort. As some of the activities described above show, there is a huge need for our input and invariably our capacity is limited.

Almost every one of Edinburgh's residents and visitors walks or wheels and we want to involve and mobilise more people in our campaigns. We have an active Twitter/X presence - one of the largest following (5,000+) of any local Living Streets group in the UK. I'm delighted that we have been able to resume our Facebook activity (thanks, Mark!). Our newsletter editor Rachael has continued to provide regular, well-received quality updates to our 400-odd mailing list. We also produced a leaflet during the year stating our top policies and priorities and illustrating 'how you can help'.

I am grateful to everyone who does something, large or small, who makes a contribution to this effort. Local initiatives often require incredible perseverance like Isobel's tenacious

championing of the Causey project, and more recently those promoting the Polwarth roundabout project.

With so many council projects and plans in the pipeline we also need more capacity to liaise with local authority staff, to look at proposed plans and to respond to consultations (where our input is likely to be influential).

We could also open valuable new fronts for example to develop work with schools (also involving our national colleagues at Living Streets Scotland) and on influencing Planning decisions and policy (our local Planning champion John unfortunately left the city during the year).

So, how can we work as effectively as possible? This is the key question for our 2024 AGM. Some options include:

- re-establish a Committee structure for the group;
- allocate specific roles to more individuals;
- set up a network of local 'cells';
- elect new officers, including Convener.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts, experience and creativity to the AGM to help us to work out how we can help to make Edinburgh the best walking city that it can be.

David Hunter
Convener

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