

Labour react to Council budget process

✘ by Councillor Ricky Henderson

Edinburgh Council [set its budget this week](#). In total, councillors are asked to decide the direction of more than £1 billion of public money, and with it the fate of various services and voluntary organisations on which so many people in the city depend.

Yet, incredibly, the first the 29 opposition Councillors saw of the SNP/Lib Dem Administration budget (ignoring a somewhat timely 'leak' to the Evening News the day before) was 10.15am, some 15 minutes into the budget meeting. Indeed, full details were not provided until 1pm, when a 'lost' page was finally circulated!

It's therefore no surprise that over the last 5 years there have been repeated calls, from opposition parties and from the general public, to change the way in which we set our budget. Labour, the Tories, and the Greens all made similar calls yesterday, and I hope come May there will be the opportunity to take this forward.

The lack of transparency and scrutiny within the process is obvious. In an age of Single Transferable Vote / proportionality and coalition politics Labour believe there is a desperate need for a more consultative and open process.

Our plans for the budget process are fundamental to our wider agenda of creating a 'co-operative council'. A council focused on working enthusiastically with local people, in the way we run the city and manage your local services.

Co-operative models are being developed to good effect throughout the UK and we believe the time is right to bring

together citizens, tax payers, communities and workers to establish new methods of service delivery that empowers people to do what they think is best for their community, with Council support, rather than the Council adopting a “we know best” approach.

So these co-op principles would underpin our budget setting process. Under a Labour-led Council Administration we would establish a new Council Budget Committee to improve the scrutiny, and effectiveness, of the budget process. The proposed committee would be made up of Councillors of all political parties.

Draft proposals would be subject to discussion by the Committee, who would look in depth at the proposals put forward by officers, weigh up their possible effect on services, and question the Council’s directors and heads of service. The Committee could also invite evidence from external groups representing wider civic society in the city, other interest groups, business, trade unions, employees and service users, regarding their priorities. In terms of long-term financial planning it could instigate work looking at the solutions that have been taken forward by other local authorities and investigate their effectiveness.

Once the Committee has fully engaged with stakeholders a draft budget could then be submitted to the Council’s Budget meeting in February, with any amendments debated on their merits, before a final budget was set for the following financial year or years.

We believe this approach would radically improve scrutiny and transparency of the budget setting process. It would embed co-operation and engagement at the heart of the council and give ordinary people a real opportunity to shape our city.

Rather than a veil of secrecy shrouded over the budget, with senior councillors and the council’s directors carving up the

pie to suit their agendas, Edinburgh Labour hope that a co-operative approach will be the first step in creating a co-operative council.

And that through working together, we can take Edinburgh forward.

Edinburgh Labour have published their draft manifesto ***Moving Edinburgh Forward*** for the forthcoming Local Government Elections [here](#).

☒ Councillor Ricky Henderson represents the Pentland Hills Ward and is the Finance Spokesman for Edinburgh Labour.