

Council looking for more savings in next five years

There was an air of déjà vu at the media briefing to tell us about the latest in a busy line of council consultations. (This one will seek your views about how the council should spend their £1 billion or so revenue budget in the next five years. It will open on 1 October if it is approved by the council's Finance Committee next week and will run until midnight on 7 December.) You will find it on the [council's Consultation Hub](#).

There was a phrase which popped up repeatedly during the ensuing hour or so. It was 'difficult choices' which probably means that some areas of the council will not get as much money as they need to function properly. And yes, this is a council which is facing hard decisions about where to make the £106 million cuts which have to be made during the next five years. The council has certain statutory obligations as to the services it must provide, but there are few rules as to how they provide them, and to what degree. There is nothing much new here. The council has already made savings of £240million in the amount it spends on services since 2012. The last time it was council employees who were most affected, and about 2,000 or so of them were made voluntarily redundant.

To find £26 million or so out of the annual budget is however a challenge, and there is a sense that every penny counts. But the Finance Convener, Alasdair Rankin, has a firm hold on the purse strings, evidenced by the past five years when the council has delivered a balanced budget (which it is of course bound to do). He now wants to plan for the long term, and that will entail what is called the Council Change Strategy. The Finance Committee are expected to have a lively debate on the terms of this council report next Thursday.

The Finance Convener is the same SNP councillor as during the five years of the last council administration, and Labour Councillor Marion Donaldson was appointed Vice-Convener last year. The coalition administration works with a cross party approach in accordance with the [52 pledges they set out at the start.](#)

So where will the cuts be made? Nobody knows yet. So any talk of cutting the Lord Provost's catering allowance are just guesswork at this stage.

The UK Government has to set out its financial stall at the end of November, and then the Scottish Government will follow in mid December. So until then the council can only work with what they call prudent figures. They expect that there will be no increase in the block grant from both governments, and they have to deal with inflation, as well as a pay rise for council workers. Then they will crunch the numbers and with the benefit of hard work by the council officers, the administration will imbue the figures with their politics and make recommendations to the budget meeting in February.

The Finance Convener is adamant that Edinburgh residents are invited to engage in debate over council spending, and that there is an openness to the way that happens.

This year there will be an online consultation, there is also a budget 'game' which will be available to groups of more than eight people, and there will be printed publications available for those who need them. And there is the budget simulator, an interactive tool which allows you to make changes to spending, but which also shows that there are consequences associated with any change.

You will get your chance to have your say from 1 October.

