

Are more council budget cuts on the way this summer?

Residents are facing a “summer of uncertainty” after opponents claimed the capital’s Finance Convener has refused to rule out alternative budget cuts including charging for music lessons to help bridge an expected £14m funding gap.

A list of possible alternative savings and budget cuts has been drawn up by officials which have been actioned in other local authorities – with detailed proposals being tabled in August. A report to the council’s finance and resources committee shows that just one month into the 2019/20 financial year, officials expect there to be a £14m black hole in the finances by March – along with a £7m pressure in health and social care.

Councillors agreed to “curtail” all discretionary expenditure and to earmark up to £5m from the council priorities fund to help ease the financial pressure.

In a published list of alternative budget cuts, officials say that “27 councils have introduced charging for instrumental music tuition with various discounts and exemptions applying.” During the coalition’s budget discussions, an insider revealed that the Labour group had refused to rule out cutting £750,000 from music tuition services, but the idea was eventually scrapped.

The list, which is not proposed to be actioned at this stage, also includes a review of roads and transportation services, a “review of the whole Early Years service” and potentially

reducing opening hours for council buildings.

Liberal Democrat Cllr Kevin Lang asked finance convener, Cllr Alasdair Rankin if he could “immediately rule out” any proposal on the list. Cllr Rankin said: “There is certainly resistance from some members to some of these proposals, as they appear now. It may be that when they are fleshed out, their views moderate in some way.

“We are about collective decision-making. Music tuition is there simply as an example of what other authorities have done.”

He added: “I expect that will be a very difficult discussion. We will see if what comes forward in August includes that or not. At the moment, we will have to see what work officers do and what the evolving picture looks like in terms of where we are in balancing our budget.

“Personally I would prefer that we did go to some of these measures but we will have to see what’s necessary.”

Labour Cllr Mandy Watt blasted opposition parties for “causing unnecessary anxiety” for groups including nurseries and those receiving music tuition.

Conservative finance spokesperson, Cllr Graham Hutchison, said: “The way to rule out anxiety is not to put something out in the public domain and then not to have a position on it.

“Until a position is reached, all that is doing is creating uncertainty. The reason that is before us is because the savings that were approved in the administration’s budget are not going to be delivered.”

Liberal Democrat Cllr Kevin Lang, said: “The SNP finance convener has left Edinburgh facing a summer of uncertainty.

“His refusal to rule out any of the options for further, deeper cuts to council services will cause huge concern right across the city. Whether it’s cuts to roads services, new charges for musical tuition or reductions in funding for early

years education, it seems nothing is off the agenda for him and his SNP/Labour councillors running the council.

“Worse still, these three months of uncertainty come as a direct result of the administration’s own financial mismanagement and its wholly unrealistic ‘keep your fingers crossed’ budget.”



City Chambers Edinburgh