

Council Budget 2020 – the proposals

There are various motions presented today from all the political parties represented at the City Chambers in Edinburgh, all with their own proposals as to how the council can set a balanced budget for the next three years. These are all being debated today at the City Chambers by all 63 councillors.

A decision will be made by the end of the day.

Coalition proposals

The first is from the Coalition made up of SNP and Labour Party councillors who propose increasing the city's council tax by 4.79% this year and the next two years, which is the maximum increase allowed by The Scottish Government.

This amounts to an increase of 44 pence per week for a Band D property in the next year which would rise to £1,338.59. It would increase the council's income from Council Tax to £306.763 million.

Against a backdrop of making savings of around £320 million since 2012/13 the administration says that Edinburgh is working from 'more robust foundations than most other authorities in Scotland'. The council has also taken the lead

in setting out the framework for a Transient Visitor Levy whenever the legislation for it is passed at Holyrood.

So what will this mean if the administration's proposals are approved in full?

Some council charges will be increased and here are some headline examples :

Parking Charges in the city centre will rise from £4.60 per hour to £4.90 per hour.

The cost of renting a full allotment plot will rise from £120 to £125 per annum.

The cost of a one year licence for a taxi is increased from £1122 to £1178, and a private hire car licence will increase from £560 to £673.

The cost of renting the Council Chamber, which is the largest room in the building, will rise from £135 to £137.03 per hour. This equates to an increase of only 1.50% and is applied across all rentals of any room in the City Chambers.

The coalition points out that the council is working in the dark with a delayed Scottish Budget and the UK Budget which is yet to come in the middle of March.

They also say that the council's settlement from Holyrood is actually unchanged in cash terms although the number of people living in Edinburgh is as we know on the rise.

In spite of the difficult conditions the administration says it will maintain their policy of no compulsory redundancies, but warns that their workforce will change over the next three years. The council will look at what it can do to provide fair work for its employees in response to recommendations from the Edinburgh Poverty Commission.

The council's Change Strategy is now a year old and it includes investment of £67 million for new and refurbished

schools, £60 million for early years services, £49 million for asset management works, £11 million on upgrading street lighting to LED lights, £5 million on improving active travel and £2.4 million on cycling projects, £15.7 million on Health and Social Care due to increasing demand, funding for a pilot scheme to prevent homelessness by providing rapid access to accommodation, £7.3 million Pupil Equity Funding to address the attainment gap in schools, £2.6 million for town centre investment in South Queensferry, Granton Station and Westside Plaza in Wester Hailes, £1.5 million in additional funding for looked after children and £3 million of additional funding to deal with rising rolls in schools.

The administration also says it is keeping in mind the climate change reality and the growth of Edinburgh's population. They say they are on target to deliver 10,000 new affordable homes by 2022 and 20,000 by 2027.

The Accounts Commission recently published its Financial Overview for 2018/19 which highlights the challenges in dealing with increasing demand for the vital services provided by the council and contrasts that with an overall level of resources which is not keeping up with demand.

The administration has to save almost £90million in the next three years to balance the books.



Members of EIS protesting outside the City Chambers on 20 February 2020 ©2020 The Edinburgh Reporter

Conservative Group proposals

The Conservative Group says that it is the SNP Government at Holyrood and the SNP/Labour administration who have 'broken the capital's finances'.

They point out that Edinburgh has the lowest block grant per head of population in Scotland. According to the Conservatives, this is the fault of the leaders of the city council who don't make the case to Holyrood for proper funding.

Conservatives want to ring fence 2% of any rise in Council Tax to pay for new schools, and lament the fact that the administration has chosen trams over schools, leaving areas such as Balerno, Liberton and Wester Hailes without any funding for new schools. They also say that the coalition is in breach of its coalition agreement by raising council tax by such a margin.

Cllr Graham Hutchison moved the Conservative Group budget and said : "This has been by some distance the most difficult budget to prepare out of the three I have overseen. This Conservative budget shows there is a better way to do things. We would remove the self imposed restrictions of the administration. By 2020 there could be real savings. We reject the proposal to remove qualified nursery teachers from schools. We would also commit to retaining the instrumental music service. And we would increase the amount of grant to Edinburgh Leisure next year by £250,000.

"Our budget would include an extra £25 million of capital expenditure to improve the Park and Ride at Hermiston and spending on roads, parks and infrastructure."

Conservatives claim that with an increase of only 1.79% the council could still pay for the Wave 4 schools and as they always do, they urge the council to outsource services such as security services and trade waste. They say that the administration has no strategic thinking and nowhere else to look. They also point out that there is a failure among the various Conveners to rein in council officers and ensure that their departmental budgets are stuck to.

Cllr Hutchison concluded : "This administration fails to deliver value for money for the citizens of Edinburgh."

Cllr Andrew Johnston supported the motion and alleged that there was less scrutiny this year than in previous years and there was no council consultation.

Green budget proposals

Cllr Gavin Corbett opened by saying that they were in uncharted territory of not knowing what the Scottish or UK Government's budgets actually say. The Green Group have set an alternative budget for the Climate Emergency. They say that the council administration has declared a climate emergency but they now need to put action behind words.

The Green Group say that their climate budget which would create a city that is more equal, liveable and attractive. They would not support any cuts to libraries, or instrumental music tuition.

Cllr Corbett said : "If we don't make these budget choices then we will get left behind."

They propose supporting moves like getting plastic out of school lunches, and cargo bikes for city centre delivery along with on street secure cycle storage. They would demand that all transport spend by the council demonstrates how it reduces emissions, and they support the possible implementation of a workplace parking levy. They would also support the expansion of solar energy through the Edinburgh Community Solar Cooperative, and investment in reducing waste.

Cllr Booth seconded the Green Group motion and said : "We would establish a waste reduction fund. Public awareness of waste has shot up since the airing of Blue Planet 2. We would promote ways to reduce, reuse and recycle waste."

And in contrast to the administration which has put bins on the streets only this week for your coffee cups, they would promote an Edinburgh-branded reusable coffee cup.

Liberal Democrat proposals

The LibDems also mentioned the background of Brexit which has caused continued uncertainty and previous decisions by the administration which they say should now be regretted. They also regret the damaging Local Government settlements over recent years by the SNP Scottish Government.

The group asserts that the administration budget will mean real cuts to frontline services, but that they provide a costed budget for three years.

They would not cut the budget for Edinburgh leisure, nursery

teachers, or instrumental music tuition. Cllr Neil Ross narrated some testimonies from those most affected by the proposed cuts. He said these pose a warning about the reality of the effect of proposed cuts.

Cllr Ross said : "We need to radically reconsider the way services are delivered. We want to empower senior officers to conduct Best Value service reviews. The council's main priority should be that services are delivered.

"I highlight that we would fund the Corstorphine Community Centre in our capital budget proposals."

Cllr Aldridge said : "I listened carefully to the Finance Convener's speech and did not hear him refer even once to the dismal settlement that Edinburgh has received from Holyrood.

" I heard the Clarsach players in the foyer this morning and making their deputation. We lose the instrumental music service at our peril. The top priorities for the LibDems are our services to communities our children and our vulnerable people."

