

Coronavirus – West Lothian to spend a further £1 million

by Stuart Somerville Local Democracy Reporter

West Lothian Council will spend a further £1million to support individuals, families and communities.

This is broken down into £639,000 for financial hardship interventions and £413,000 of council resources.

Plans were revealed in a fractious exchange during the December meeting of the council's Executive in which the SNP demanded that £1m of reserves be added to the fund to boost what had already been committed.

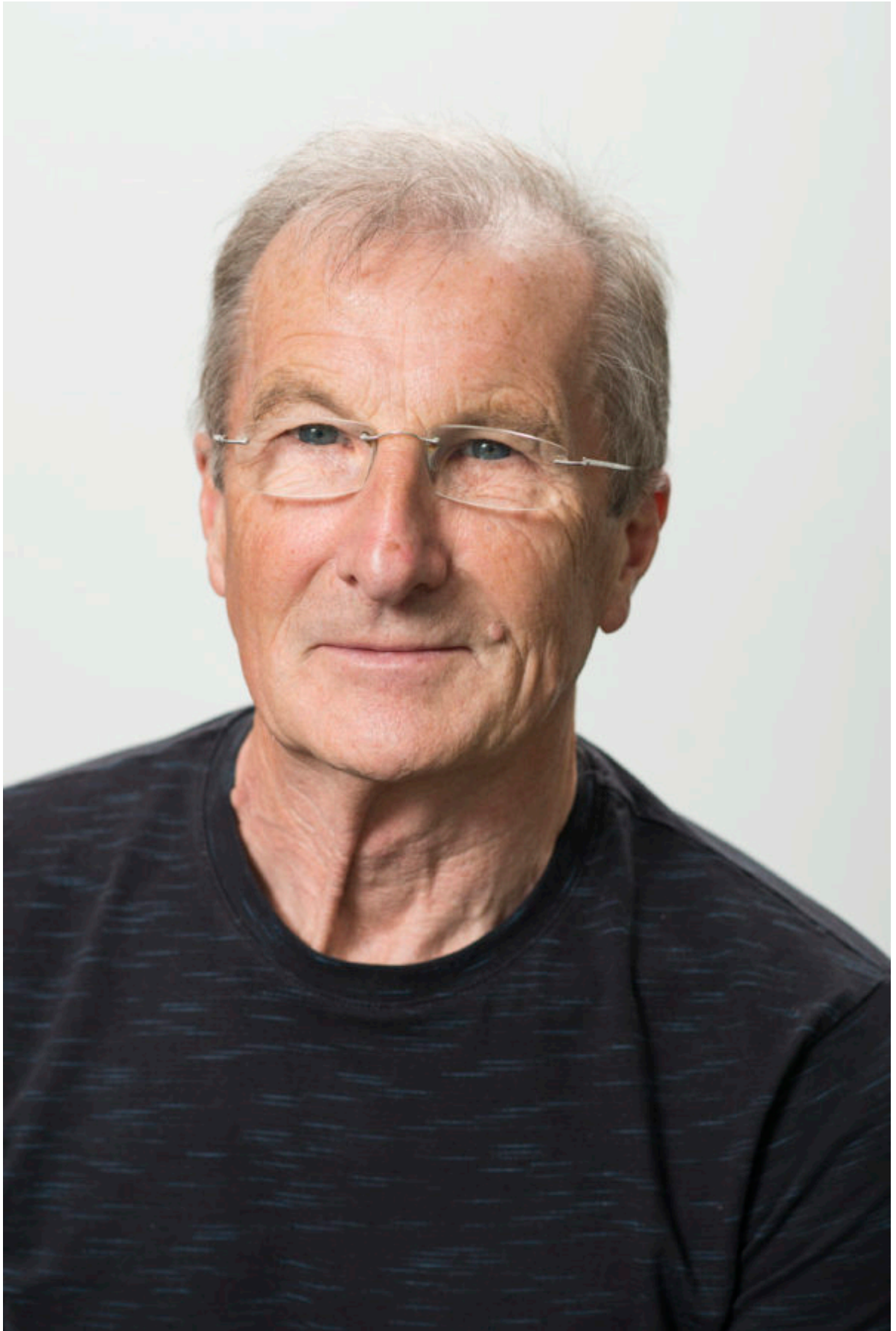
The bulk of the monies will be spent on winter clothing payable for every child in receipt of school clothing grant as at 31 December. Parents and guardians will receive the additional payment in their bank accounts in January 2021.

A further £50,000 will be allocated to all schools for a clothing and equipment fund to support households on low income with footwear and equipment and this is based on the needs of individual pupils.

£28,000 will be allocated to support low income households in danger of disconnection due to fuel arrears with a utility

provider. Support will be provided by the Anti-Poverty Service energy advisers.

The sum of £250,000 will be used to provide job support and training grants over the next two years and a further £100,000 will be used to support a new Mental Health Providers Network to support local people.



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L-R Cllr Frank Anderson, East Livingston and East Calder and

Cllr Lawrence Fitzpatrick, Livingston South Photos courtesy of West Lothian Council

But SNP group depute leader Frank Anderson said it was not enough, and accused the minority Labour administration of “a lack of political leadership” and withholding money.

“The rainy day is here!” said the SNP councillor, lodging an amendment to use an extra £1m from the reserves budget. “That would allow us to double what we give to each of these services,” he said.

Mr Anderson added that the council talked about the money as if it had allocated its own cash, when in fact it had come from Holyrood or Westminster governments.

“These are not normal times. We have to be seen to doing something. This is us putting our money where our mouth is. We are sitting here with £3m of reserves and saying ‘there’s nothing we can do about it’. We should be there at front, making sure we spend that money.”

Head of Finance, Donald Forrest told the Executive that best practice dictated keeping the reserve funds, in view of future threats.



Kirsteen Sullivan, Whitburn and Blackburn, Depute Leader of the council Photo courtesy of West Lothian Council

Depute council leader Councillor Kirsteen Sullivan said: "Its quite clear that whilst it's a rainy day, we potentially have a monsoon of the way. It has been clearly laid out that the potential impact of a no deal Brexit will be bigger than the pandemic. We are also about to going into season of very

unpredictable weather were reserves may have to be used. It would appear to me prudent to keep money in reserves should emergencies arrive.”

Cllr Sullivan slated the suggestion that the council had not spent its own funds suggesting the costs of implementing emergency programmes had be borne by the council, often without support from government. The council had also put £100,000 into launching the Food Network within weeks of the start of the lockdown.

The SNP amendment was defeated by 11 votes to two.

Leader of West Lothian Council, Councillor Lawrence Fitzpatrick said: “Significant resources have, and continue to be, channelled through councils to support businesses and the self-employed, with West Lothian Council facilitating payments of nearly £29.4 million, to date. The administering of the various grants and support has been delivered through our own staffing and financial resources with minimal funding provided to the council for administration purposes.

“This has been a significant piece of work and a substantial amount of time and cost has been incurred during a time when council staffing and financial resources were already greatly restrained.”

“The £1m of remaining funding will go a long way to help local people.

“Clearly this pandemic has, and continues to have, a significant impact on the economy and the lives of local people and we will do all we can to help those in need.”