

Council agrees to freeze council rents

by Joseph Anderson Local Democracy Reporter

The Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Green Party councillors have combined to ensure a rent freeze for council tenants in the next year.

The move between all opposition councillors was organised late last night, when the three main opposition parties on the council submitted their budget proposals, and realised that all demanded that council rents would be kept at the same rates for 2021/22.

As part of the city's 2021/22 budget – being discussed at a meeting of the council today – the SNP/Labour administration had proposed increasing rent for the council's 20,000 tenants by 2%.

The rise would have netted £2 million for the council for the coming financial year, and the ruling coalition said the majority of households would feel no impact on their income, as Universal Credit would cover the increase.

The administration also referred to the annual tenant's survey, which collated responses from 1,000 tenants, finding that 98% of respondents were in favour of the increase in exchange for renovations and general improvements to the

council's building stock.

However, [in their deputation](#) the Edinburgh Tenants' Association, (ETA) led by Betty Stone, called for the funding to be taken from rent arrears which are owed to the council.

The deputation to the council from the ETA said: "Edinburgh Tenants Federation (ETF) is asking elected members to consider freezing rather than increasing rents paid by City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) tenants in 2021/22.

"The last year has been like no other in terms of the financial pressures tenants and other people have endured as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

"In our day to day contact with tenants in our communities, local tenants' and residents' groups and with our federation members we have become aware of tenants losing income and jobs, which has meant some have struggled to pay their current rent.

"In addition, as the furlough scheme is due to close at the end of April, we at ETF are concerned that this will push even more tenants into poverty.

"It is our view that many tenants will simply not be able to afford the 2% rent increase.

"ETF representatives would like to see CEC try to recoup the rent arrears from tenants which have built up during the pandemic rather than increase the rents.

"Furthermore, ETF hopes that CEC accepts the 3% offer from the Scottish Government instead of increasing the council tax."

The rent freeze was approved by 34 votes to 27.

Speaking in favour of freezing rent, Almond councillor Graham Hutchison, Conservatives, said: "By any reasonable standard, many of our council houses would, and should be, declared

unlivable – and many are literally home to our most vulnerable citizens who have been hit hardest by Covid-19.

“At this time when our citizens are desperately trying to recover from the effects of Covid-19, we should be keeping money in their pockets – not in the council’s.

“It’s no good saying to someone in a council house that they’re going to receive a new kitchen in 2077, or a new bathroom in 2031, when their roof is leaking, when windows have the wind blowing in, when they have damp patches all over their walls – that is the conditions that the citizens in our council housing are facing.

“By any other standard Edinburgh City Council would be considered a slum landlord.

“We would not accept this from private landlords, why do we allow our council houses to be let to residents in the state they’re in?”

Fellow Almond councillor Kevin Lang, Liberal Democrats, said: “The rent rise is probably the most tone deaf part of the administration’s budget.

“I honestly didn’t think that at the height of the pandemic, and the worst economic crisis I hope any of us ever has to live through, a period which is hitting the poorest the hardest – I didn’t think the administration would present this council with a motion that hikes up council rent, at a time when so many folk are least able to afford it.”

Council leader Adam McVey said: “The housing investment plans and the revenue plan which was agreed at committee is not a one year plan – it’s a 30 year plan – and the cost of this decision is not £2m, it is closer to £100m over the lifetime of that investment plan.

“We’ve seen and heard that we need to deliver environmental

improvements for our tenants, that we need to continue to invest in our properties and drive up standards – that is not helped by taking nearly £100m of investment out of that strategy.

“More than 1,000 tenants got in touch as part of our survey, 98% of them were supportive of our investment plans.

“We will listen to our tenants, we’ll listen to what they want, because what they want is properties for the 21st century and we’ll continue to invest in that.

“The accusation that’s been thrown at the council – ‘don’t worry, just go and speak to the Scottish government’ – well, we are speaking to the Scottish government.

“Just yesterday the convener wrote to the housing secretary asking for hundreds of millions of pounds-worth of additional investment to try and refocus national money into Edinburgh.

“That will help enormously if it comes to fruition, but that doesn’t take away from the need to invest, right across the board, in our properties.”

The SNP/Labour administration lost the vote by 27 votes to 34.

Speaking after the debate, Leith councillor Chas Booth, Green Party, said: “Edinburgh has by far the highest council rents in Scotland, 30% higher than the average.

“Half of tenants will face the full brunt of the average £100 rise, either in part or full.

“So in the special circumstances of this year Green councillors thought it was right to freeze rents at 2020-21 levels for some of the lowest income households in the city at a time of unique hardship, with reserves in the housing account offsetting any impact on the service.

“That is why we brought other opposition councillors together

last night to agree a joint approach and I am delighted that has won through today. Rents will be frozen next year.”

Depute Leader of the council, Cammy Day, who represents Forth for the Labour Party, commented: “Edinburgh Labour is disappointed that the Greens and the Tories have ignored the views of the tenants we consulted.

“The impact on the Greens and Tories working together will see nearly 200 affordable homes reduced from our plans.

“This reduces our ability to invest in tenants’ homes with upgrades and energy efficiency measures.

“The Edinburgh Poverty Commission made clear that affordable housing was a top priority – this decision from the Greens and Tories will delay the chance of an affordable home.

“This is not about our tenants. It’s about the upcoming elections, and playing politics, rather than giving the best home we can to our tenants.”

Commenting on the vote, Elle Glenny, an organiser for Living Rent, Scotland’s tenants’ union, said: “Across Scotland, tenants have faced utterly intolerable circumstances during the pandemic.

“Rents that were already unaffordable have become simply impossible to meet, and it was ludicrous that the council were even considering rent increases under these circumstances.

“This vote shows not just what’s possible – that rent increases are not inevitable – but what is necessary.

“Tenants – both social and private – need urgent protections from unaffordable rents, including strong rent controls.