

# **Opposition groups lead charge on council rents**

**Green councillors said it was down to them that council rents have been frozen in the next year as they led the opposition groups on the City of Edinburgh Council in successfully proposing the move.**

But when we delved into the matter, it is the case that the Greens approached the other political groups, but the collaborative proposal was then moved by Conservative finance spokesperson, Cllr Graham Hutchison. There are seventeen Conservative councillors, and fourteen in the Green and Liberal Democrat groups. While the Greens and Liberal Democrats had both separately proposed a rent freeze the Conservatives had incorporated a wider proposal so that urgent repairs for council tenants would be carried out more quickly.

All three political groups worked as a team agreed to join forces on this and deliver more for tenants than simply a freeze in their rent.

The ruling SNP-Labour coalition had suggested a rise of 2% in rents for council housing next year. All three opposition groups – Greens, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats – countered with a rent freeze to reflect the reduced service over the last year, and continuing hardship faced by tenants, many of who are at the lowest end of the income scale.

Councillors from all three groups agreed a joint proposal

which defeated the coalition's proposed rise and gave more to tenants than a simple cash saving. Both Conservatives and Liberal Democrat groups had included a freeze on council rents in their proposed budgets. All opposition groups realised last night when all proposals were published that they had to combine forces.

Cllr Graham Hutchison told The Edinburgh Reporter: "The plight of our council housing tenants is a national disgrace and an embarrassment for our capital city and the administration. Alongside a rent freeze, the Conservative HRA budget proposal invested £1.86m to accelerate improvements across 180 council housing blocks and committed extra staffing resource to bring forward £4m worth of repairs. In doing so we re-focused the attentions of the housing revenue account to deliver on our duty of care as a landlord to our council housing tenants.

"We are delighted that the Greens and Liberal Democrats joined with us to support our plans as part of the composite motion and defeat the inaction of the SNP and Labour."

Cllr Chas Booth 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.

He added: "There is a huge need in Edinburgh for more investment in new and improved housing. However, it's wrong to expect that to be fully funded by tenants' rents, in other words money from some of the lowest income households in the

city. The council needs to be far more robust in challenging the Scottish Government for a bigger share of the national affordable housing budget and investing in dry warm homes.”

Now that the freeze on council rents has been imposed, it is official council policy and cannot under the Council’s Standing Orders be revisited for six months except in certain circumstances. But the administration has added a requirement that this policy is re-examined by the council’s Housing and Homelessness and Fair Work Committee (HHFW).

The coalition added in the following line: Council “Calls for a report to the HHFW committee in one cycle on the impact of the budget decision on the Housing Revenue Account business plan and the capital programme.” Whether that will be a report for noting, or an attempt by the administration to change the policy during the year is unclear.

**18 February 2021 20.58 This article was amended to incorporate comment from Cllr Hutchison and clarifies the collaboration among the opposition groups.**