

Rent freeze agreed in East Lothian

by Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter

Council tenants are set to benefit from a rent freeze this year after East Lothian Council's administration scrapped plans for an annual increase.

A draft housing budget due to be put before councillors for approval next week proposes a one-year hiatus on rent increases.

It comes a month after the council's cabinet members approved a reduced increase of two per cent from the anticipated annual five per cent rise.

And it comes as members will be asked to consider freezing council tax charges, after the Scottish Government made funding available to local authorities.

The revised housing budget, which is understood to have been produced after the Conservative opposition group pushed for the rent increase to be scrapped, will go to council on Tuesday for approval.

It proposes no rent increase for the coming year and a return to the annual five per cent increase in 2022/23.

The changes also follow the findings of a rent consultation carried out with tenants, which found support for the administration's two per cent increase fall.

The annual consultation has in the past found high support among tenants for proposed rent rises.

However the latest consultation saw nearly twice as many respondents take part compared to the previous year and lower support, with just 65 per cent of tenants happy to pay the reduced two per cent increase.

Two years ago, nearly 80 per cent of tenants backed a five per cent increase, with an "overwhelming" majority reported to have done the same in last year's consultation.

This year, however, more than half of the tenants who took part said their financial situation had been worsened over the last year because of Covid-19.

Just over 27 per cent of tenants reported being furloughed during the pandemic, with 24 per cent saying their work hours had been reduced and over five per cent saying they had been made redundant.

The proposed housing budget goes before councillors for approval at a virtual meeting on Tuesday.

The council will meet to set its council tax the following week.

The administration had proposed a lower council tax rise of three per cent, however that was before The Scottish Government announced that funding would be made available to local authorities if they agreed a freeze for the coming year.

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