

Council to raise council tax by three per cent to fund £1 billion budget

Council tax in Edinburgh will rise by three per cent from April, as part of a budget which has agreed spending of more than £1 billion over the next year.

The City of Edinburgh Council budget for 2022/23 was passed on Thursday and included investments of £1 million in roads and pavements and £1.5m to “deep clean” the city and improve its parks.

Councillors also voted to freeze rent for council tenants for the second year and set aside £1.1 million to help ease the cost of living crisis for those most in need.

Included in £236,689,000 of capital spending is £42 million for the extension of the city’s tram line to Newhaven, due to open next year, whilst £2 million originally budgeted for free tram travel for under 22s was scrapped at the last minute and instead has been put into reserves.

Education and Children’s Services will be funded with a total of £35.34 million from the budget in the year ahead, whilst parks, greenspace, cemeteries will get £2.14 million.

A commitment was made by the administration to continue to invest 10 per cent of the council’s roads and transport budget (£1.783 million) in cycling infrastructure and £6.3 million to

decarbonise the council's vehicle fleet.

Meanwhile, city centre parking charges, allotment hire and garden waste collection fees will all rise by around five per cent – and the cost of school milk is set to increase by nearly 30 per cent.

In South Queensferry, the cost of pay and display parking will increase by 12.5 per cent.

A council tax rise of three per cent was agreed – double the figure proposed by the Tories but the same as the amount proposed by the Greens and Liberal Democrats.

Over the year, the most expensive homes in band H will pay an increase of nearly £100.

At the council's budget meeting the SNP/Labour administration presented a balanced budget with no cuts, after officers successfully closed a funding gap of £7.637 million and had £208,000 left over.

Added to a one-off grant announced by The Scottish Government in January, £9.8 million of unallocated funds were available for the council to spend, which the coalition said would go towards "community-based projects and improvements".

Of this sum, £1 million is being invested in road and pavement maintenance, another £1 million in support of children's services to "offset Covid-related pressures" and £1.1 million in "easing the cost of living crisis for our most vulnerable citizens".

Each of Edinburgh's 17 wards will receive a share of £1.072m to fund a "deep clean" of the city that will involve graffiti removal, street cleaning and hot washing equipment for city centre closes.

However the biggest share of unallocated resources – £2 million – is being used internally within the council to

'improve HR systems' in response to recommendations made following Susanne Tanner QC's inquiry into workplace culture following the inquiry into internal matters at the council in the wake of the death of senior social worker, Sean Bell.

Other one-off investments will include:

- £250,000 to set up 'Neighbourhood Action Teams' to tackle hot spot areas of unkempt land
- £200,000 to bring back temporary toilets to the city's parks
- £500,000 to support the council's climate targets
- £150,000 for the regulation of short term lets in Edinburgh
- £200,000 for local community festivals including Diwali celebrations and Leith Festival
- £61,000 to complete the restoration of the Portobello Kilns

An additional £6.435 million of Government funding is expected by the local authority in the coming months, with the coalition pledging to spend the majority "supporting the most vulnerable households through the cost of living crisis".

£4.95 million of this will be used to give grants of £150 to the city's 33,000 low-income households.

Presenting the motion, the Council leader Adam McVey began by making a verbal amendment to remove £2 million initially budgeted to fund free tram travel for under 22 year-olds and put that into reserves instead.

It is yet to be confirmed if The Scottish Government will cover the cost of extending the new young persons' free bus travel scheme to include travel on the tram.

Cllr McVey said: "We have not concluded conversations and discussions with The Scottish Government on this matter, although we do consider this an ongoing matter."

He added: "This budget represents five years of progress, five years of progress building and opening new schools and five years of progress delivering world-class sports facilities like Meadowbank.

"We have made sure that we are investing as much as we can in the future of people in our city. This budget also marks, as well as five years of this administration, the end, or at least what we hope will be the end, of two years of dealing with a global pandemic that none of us would have wanted to endure.

"We are not over it yet, the fact that I am delivering this budget myself with Covid right now and our finance convenor was struck severely with covid that he was unable to deliver this budget today shows just how far we are from going back to full normality.

"This budget invests in our core services and continues the essential investments that we've made right throughout this term. It tackles climate change, it fights poverty and it invests in the wellbeing of our residents."

After three rounds of voting to take account of the other political parties own budget proposals, the coalition budget was passed by 26 votes to 17.

Opposition councillors were quick to point out that despite a balanced budget this year, a gap of more than £60 million looms in 2023/24.

The Conservative finance spokesman, Cllr Andrew Johnston, said the additional £9.8 million was "very welcome" but he added: "It's nothing more than a cynical election bribe.

"Maybe we should have an election every year if that's what it takes for The Scottish Government to give us some extra money," he said. "But the £9 million can't disguise the fact that next year this council faces a £60 million gap in

funding.

“It can’t disguise the fact that last year this SNP/Labour administration broke their own coalition pledge to restrict council tax increases to 3 per cent. Instead they went along with a 4.79 per cent rise and that’s something they’re going to have to explain on the doorstep as we approach the May election.”

The Tories’ budget proposed a 1.5 per cent rise in council tax, scrapping garden tax (the £25 a year charge for each household to have garden waste uplifted), £2.1 million to develop an “integrated programme focussed on preventing poverty and homelessness” and £10.4 million to support teachers and school support staff and £300,000 to increase the number of electric vehicle charging points throughout the capital.

The Conservative Group also opposed planned increases the cost of in parking charges, school milk and cremation charges.

Cllr Johnston said: “The Conservative group believe that the people of Edinburgh have been short changed for too long, that’s why we propose a 1.5 per cent increase in council tax – half that of the administration. We would have gone further, however, and we would have looked at a council tax freeze.”

Meanwhile, the Green Party’s Alex Staniforth put forward the party’s “budget for climate and social justice”.

He said: “This year is the first year this term that we are proposing no more than a three per cent increase in council tax. There are two reasons for this; the first is that we recognise the cost of living crisis and do not want to impose higher taxes on the people of Edinburgh at a time when every penny counts.

“We have pledged to replace the council’s refuse collection vehicles with electric vehicles. This would show Edinburgh

Council leading the way in making itself independent in the need for fossil fuels in its day to day operations as well as doing our part to make the city's air cleaner which is good for everybody.

"We have done away with the additional proposed cost to school milk, community access to school facilities and at-home care.

"We are the only party that has pledged to support both temporary public toilets during the high season this coming year and to build four more permanent public toilets as well as staff them appropriately."



Cllr Neil Ross on Bread Road in April 2021 PHOTO ©2021 The Edinburgh Reporter

Introducing the Liberal Democrats' plans, Cllr Neil Ross outlined the party's intention to spend £9 million fixing paths, pavements and roads, £1 million reversing council cuts to teachers' budgets, £5 million upgrading playparks and greenspaces, £1 million to "clean up the streets" and £2.5 million on flood prevention and clearing blocked gullies.

"We have listened to local residents in communities across this city and the Lib Dem budget reflects their priorities not only to fix some of the failings of this administration but also to set out a positive way forward," he said.

Cllr Ross also took aim at the SNP for reducing councils' funding, which he said leads to councillors "taking the blame" for cuts to local services.

He said: "Every year, the same question comes to mind around budget setting time: why is local government so often the poor relation in terms of funding?"

"Independent analysis has shown that over the past 11 years the SNP Scottish Government, usually with the help of the Greens, has chosen to impose cuts to its revenue and capital funding of local government, despite increases in its funding from Westminster.

"We need local decision making and local accountability. So how should this council respond? With robust challenges to the Scottish Government to demand fair funding for Edinburgh while at the same time ensuring that council services meet the needs of residents."

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter

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