

West Lothian Council raises council tax by 5.8 per cent

West Lothian Council pulled back from drastic cuts to public transport subsidy and library closures in its budget, but at the cost of a 5.8 percent hike in council tax.

A Labour proposal also withdrew high-profile cuts including charging for garden waste collection and changes to school transport.

Schools crossing patrols and festive lighting funding have also been saved.

Closures of community centres remain on the agenda along with cuts in recycling centre hours, (though all five will remain open).

West Lothian Leisure will have to move to self funding and changes in the way council services are delivered will go ahead as will the removal of the animal attraction at Beecraigs. The concessionary rail scheme will end.

The council agreement voted through the 5.8 per cent council tax increase on Tuesday, which equates to an extra £1.47 per week for a band D property. It will generate an income of £5.431 million in 2023 to 2024.

A council spokesman said that will be spent on delivering, protecting and improving local services in West Lothian and

will help to prevent a number of proposed service savings measures being implemented.

He maintained there are discounts and exemptions in place to reduce council tax for the most vulnerable in society, including the council tax reduction scheme.

There are 81,052 chargeable homes in West Lothian. Of those 13,953 households are in receipt of a council tax reduction and 11,279 of those are in receipt of a 100 per cent reduction.

An extra 900 houses are scheduled to be built per year creating 4,500 extra homes paying council tax in five years' time.

SNP Councillor Willie Boyle warned Labour the 5.8 per cent increase " would come back to haunt them."

Council leader Lawrence Fitzpatrick, presenting the Labour motion, criticised what he claimed was disdain shown by The Scottish Government for local authorities and the harsh budget settlement imposed on councils.

He added: "I strongly believe the SNP Government has given up any pretence of partnership working or recognition of councils' legitimate authority to make decisions on services they deliver on behalf of valued local communities.

"Had no cuts to council budgets been agreed council tax would have had to have increased by more than 30 per cent and many households would be worse off under SNP proposals to bring in a £35 charge for brown bins with a four per cent council tax rise which would cost more than no charge and a 5.8 per cent increase for properties up to and including Band E.

"Despite the immense financial challenges facing the council myself and my Labour colleagues have done all we can to ensure a budget has been set for the coming financial year that will

provide for the people of West Lothian.”

An SNP amendment promoted a budget which included a four per cent council tax rise and maintained community centres and libraries along with crossing patrols in the heart of hard-hit communities.

Their plan however only budgeted for 50 percent continuing subsidy of bus services. It did not change existing proposals for West Lothian Leisure to stand alone.

Public consultation on council spending had brought responses from just over 5,000 people. Council officials pointed out in earlier meetings and reasserted their claim at this meeting that the response was the best ever to a consultation.

Cllr Boyle dismissed that, saying: “A lot of this report is based upon a consultation that clearly is failing the people of West Lothian. To say that 5,045 responses is great just shows how diabolical our public engagement is.

“The first phase of this engagement was over five weeks in peak holiday time. This is embarrassing. That we can’t engage with the people we are here to serve. This needs to be looked at. We have further years of austerity ahead. We have to get better at engaging with the people we are here to serve.”

The SNP amendment called for all officers and parties to work together on budget decisions and criticised what it said was a lack of councillor involvement at an early stage in identifying priorities.

Fellow SNP councillors reiterated the need for more cross party involvement in major budget decision highlighting the input needed from a party which has the most councillors and share of the vote.

Cllr Janet Campbell, SNP group leader said: “We are now showing how it is possible to reduce the expected rise in

council tax and also to reinstate services this administration is willing to cut. This is a fully costed budget that takes cognisance of the difficult position that we are in.”

She said that the SNP budget called for a review of how council services are delivered so that they are designed around the needs and interests of the people and communities of West Lothian.

She added: “We are focusing on outcomes not processes. The SNP group want to strengthen the social contract we have with the people of West Lothian. And do everything possible to shield families from welfare cuts and austerity cuts of the UK Tory Government.”

The Labour motion in favour of their revenue budget proposal was passed by 17 votes to 14.

by Stuart Somerville

Local Democracy Reporter.

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