

# **West Lothian – Labour calls for reset of local government**

**West Lothian Council's Labour group has called for a "reset" of the relationship between Holyrood and all 32 Scottish local councils as they highlight most of the local authority budget is ring-fenced.**

Following weeks of debate on ever-tightening budgets and cutbacks, the Labour-led minority administration tabled a motion from Cllr Andrew McGuire, pointing out there is little funding left over for local priorities.

Voting against the motion on Tuesday morning, SNP councillors suggested that Labour was ignoring the fact that ring fenced funding ensured the most vulnerable in society were protected. Cllr McGuire, a Labour member for Armadale and Blackridge said: "I very much hope that people realise that this motion is not party political. It's not about the party that's in government. We, the 33 elected members in this chamber were elected and we should have the power to make decisions for the people of West Lothian.

"What we've seen in my six years on this council is that we are hamstrung and time after time on this council we can't always take the decisions we want because of funding restrictions and constraints placed upon us by the Scottish Government."

He pointed to recent budget decisions in Scotland where, faced with SNP-run Glasgow city council proposing to cut teaching jobs, the Scottish Government "put out a press release"

changing tack to protect posts, but without increasing funding.

Cllr McGuire added: "Time after time local government in Scotland is used as a vehicle to implement Scottish Government or SNP government policy and it's absolutely unacceptable.

"We need to make a stand to highlight that we should have the decision making authority to make decisions that impact the people of West Lothian."

The Labour motion added: "Council notes with alarm that 77 per cent of West Lothian Council's budget for 2023 to 2024 is effectively ring-fenced for the delivery of Scottish Government's national commitments, leaving little room for local priorities. Council calls upon the Scottish Government to reset the relationship it has with Scottish local authorities and instructs the Chief Executive to write to the first minister, the cabinet secretary with responsibility for local authorities, the chief executive of COSLA and the president of COSLA to outline our views on this."

Tabling an amendment SNP deputy group leader Councillor Robert de Bold said Labour's stance was deeply concerning.

His amendment added: "The amounts of grant funding from the Scottish Government are commonly determined by specific need of the local authority – for the Scottish Government to allocated funding because of a specific need of a local authority, only to then permit the local authority to spend that funding on something else would be financial malpractice and undermine the local government funding model.

"Council therefore expresses deep concerns at the attempts by the Labour Group to redirect specific funding from the Scottish Government, which is invariably based on a specific need in West Lothian, to other entirely undefined functions."

For the Lib Dems, Councillor Sally Pattle: "It is very clear that over the past 10 years local government funding and freedom has been severely curtailed. The Lib Dems believe in the power of localism. Centralisation by the government has

rarely delivered for the people it is supposed to serve.” Referring to examples of centralisation, she mentioned “disastrous” proposals for the school placement appeal system to be taken away from local authority control and the potential introduction of the National Care Service. SNP group leader Janet Campbell told the meeting that the largest amount of targeted funding had been directed at early learning and childcare to protect the most vulnerable children in Scotland as well as the development of services such as criminal justice pupil equity funding and children in the most disadvantaged communities.

“What of these specific funding schemes would you cut?” she asked.

Cllr Tom Conn suggested local SNP councillors had blinded themselves to the £150 million cuts the council has already had to make.

Backing the amendment, Cllr Maria MacAulay said: “The Scottish Government has to make policy decisions and allocate funding on the basis of need.”

Summing up the debate, Cllr McGuire said: “It’s not about funding, it’s about policy matters and about making decisions as locally as possible. I know you all well enough to know that’s a principle you [SNP councillors] agree with so I’m very surprised that you all rushed to the defence of the Scottish Government.”

The Labour motion was backed 18 votes to 14.

*by Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter*

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