

Edinburgh councillors discuss possible council tax freeze

The matter of The Scottish Government's sudden proposal to freeze council tax announced recently by the First Minister at the SNP party conference was discussed by councillors under an emergency motion tabled by the Labour administration on Monday.

This motion was carried by councillors on the Finance & Resources Committee by 8 votes to 3.

Cllr Mandy Watt, Finance Convener, had lodged the motion at the special meeting which had been convened mainly to discuss the multi million pound gap in the council's finances. She had ruled the matter of a council tax freeze as an emergency, explaining the background of the announcement by Humza Yousaf, and that it flew in the face of the Verity House Agreement between The Scottish Government and Scottish Local authorities. She said it "blindsided Local Government, COSLA and the SNP's coalition partners at Holyrood".

Cllr Watt said this announcement compounded the real term

income cuts for local government in Scotland and will “exacerbate an already precarious environment”. She said: “I feel that we need to go back to COSLA and put it properly in writing what the financial position is and also include in that situation with EIJB. And I would also like to write to The Scottish Government and or the ministers and say that it’s really disappointing.”

Cllr James Dalgleish seconded the Convener and said: “I suppose after months of some bad headlines I understand why the First Minister would need to grab the attention of the media and the public at this year’s SNP conference, but this might not necessarily be in the way it was hoping for.

“We have amazing teams in the customer hubs, welfare rights and Income and Benefits teams who are there to help residents regarding council tax issues, and we all know they do their jobs well. But that doesn’t take away from the fact that we shouldn’t be here discussing this issue. That could have been avoided if policy wasn’t made upon the hoof at a party political conference, and as a result, we’re looking at millions of pounds for council tax and that could have funded our services potentially gone, and our relationship with The Scottish Government even more damaged than it was before.”

The motion called for the Chief Financial Officer to write to COSLA as a matter of urgency to put on record the council tax rates which will be required to fully protect services and for the Convener to write to the Scottish Government “to emphasise Committee’s dismay that a decision proposing to reintroduce a council tax freeze without consulting COSLA regarding the impact this would have on local services; and our view that the Verity House Agreement should be adhered to in respect of ring-fencing of funds and both existing and proposed local taxes”.

Opposition councillors

Cllr Lesley Macinnes, SNP group finance spokesperson, had lodged an addendum (which has not yet been published on the council website). She said: "If we can offer a council tax freeze at this point it takes away an enormous degree of uncertainty for particular people. The motion concentrates entirely on process. What it doesn't do is talk about impact. And it doesn't talk about the relief that this has brought to a lot of families and individuals here in Edinburgh."

Cllr Marco Biagi supported Cllr Macinnes and also said: "I certainly agree with Cllr Dalgelish that the council tax system is one that desperately needs changed. I spent a year of my life once looking at it, prodding it looking at options for replacement, reform...it remains a regressive tax."

Cllr Nois-McVey pointed out that the First Minister said five days ago that this policy will be fully funded. He said: "That's a very welcome announcement. I agree there's lots of detail to pursue within that. I think in terms of supporting a freeze for the lowest household, the lowest income households in the city, our position hasn't changed at all."

"If the government can freeze council tax for every household in Edinburgh, and make it fully funded I think that's where this council should be. I think we should support the plan and negotiate from that point, to make sure Edinburgh gets the best deal possible."

Cllr Lewis Younie (Liberal Democrat) said: "This is not a good way to govern. To decide privately you will announce a huge policy 48 hours in advance and tell nobody is just wild." He went on to say that the government was "completely disrespecting the Verity House agreement. The ink wasn't even dry before it was broken. That matters. It really does."

The committee voted in favour of the motion recognising that

Edinburgh's services would be at peril without the support of Council Tax revenue. The SNP pointed out that Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer promised to freeze council tax earlier this year and Scottish Labour leader, Anas Sarwar, said last month that increasing council tax would be "making life harder for working people".

Conservative councillor Phil Doggart said: "It's great that – as we do every budget time – we produce budgets with the lowest council tax increase. But if we do not get the block grant to replace any increases to council tax coming from Holyrood, then we're in a slightly tricky position."

SNP MSP Gordon MacDonald said: "The SNP Scottish Government's council tax freeze will help millions of families across Scotland who are struggling to make ends meet, and there is no excuse for the Labour Party's equivocation on this policy.

"It beggars belief that the Labour Party now seemingly believe that people, who are already struggling immensely with the Westminster cost of living crisis, should pay more tax.

"It is clear that the SNP is the only party who will stand up for the people of Scotland, take meaningful action to put money back in people's pockets and stand up for Scots in the face of the Westminster cost of living crisis."



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