

East Lothian: council tax freeze will mean 10% rise next year

Plans also approved at the budget meeting include a £5million refurbishment of Tranent's Loch Centre and a doubling of council tax on second homes

Residents in East Lothian will face a 10 per cent rise in council tax next year after councillors agreed to support a freeze in this year's budget.

A special meeting of East Lothian Council to set the budget for the coming years saw the Labour administration's plans to freeze council tax for the year ahead but introduce the increased rise next year approved.

The Scottish Government has offered local authorities who freeze council tax additional funding equal to just under a five per cent rise.

However at the virtual meeting of elected members on Tuesday, finance chiefs said when the grant was included with the rest of the national funding it was closer to a three per cent increase.

The administration budget included priority funding of £5million for the Loch Centre, in Tranent, to carry out a major refurbishment and reopen its swimming pool which was welcomed by councillors from all parties.

And there was universal support for plans to make owners of second homes pay double the council tax paid by residents.

But there were disagreements about other proposals from the

Labour group, with plans to reduce instrumental music services and encourage school children who have nationally funded Under 22 free bus passes to stop using school passes challenged by opposition groups.

During a meeting in which all main political groups accused others of 'hiding' proposed cuts until the last minute instead of working together, amendments introduced by the SNP and Conservative groups were dismissed by the administration.

The SNP called for the withdrawal of the school bus pass to be introduced through a planned reduction, warning bus companies would require support to implement the change.

Meanwhile the Conservative group opposed any reduction to music services which would see pupils given less choice of the type of instruments they had access to or number of spaces available.

And there were disagreements over funding for area partnerships which were established in East Lothian to distribute community funding on a devolved basis to projects most in need.

The Conservative group wanted the funding withdrawn describing the six partnerships which cover Musselburgh, Fa'side, Haddington and Lammermuir, Dunbar and East Linton, North Berwick Coastal and Preston, Seton, Gosford, as 'bureaucratic bodies'.

Instead they wanted more funding to be given to community councils, while the SNP wanted the funding distributed on a basis of areas of most deprivation rather than a blanket amount.

Councillor Lachlan Bruce, Conservative, said the partnerships were supposed to be there to ensure funding helps deprivation in their areas.

But he said: "The area partnership in North Berwick funded heritage lampposts in Dirleton. It is hard to see what that has to do with deprivation.

Councillor Colin McGinn, Labour, described the comments about area partnerships as "disrespectful".

Councillor Andy Forrest, Labour, said: "The money we put into

our communities and grants come back to us twentyfold.”

The Labour administration budget was approved by 11 votes to ten after independent councillor Kenny McLeod backed Labour councillors, while Scottish Greens councillor Shona McIntosh opposed it alongside SNP and Conservative councillors.

Measures approved include funding cuts to The Brunton Theatre Trust of £200,000 and a reduction in the community grants fund of £100,000, leaving £1.4m available while area partnership funds will be reduced from £50,000 to £45,000 for the smaller ones while Musselburgh’s £100,000 grant will be reduced to £90,000.

The council’s arms length leisure firm enjoy will see its annual £2million funding reduced by £100,000 and moves will be made to encourage sports clubs to take over management and maintenance of the facilities they use with golf courses such as Winterfield, in Dunbar, and Musselburgh, potentially considered for the change.

Library funding is being reduced with smaller libraries asked to look at ways to adapt to offer more community facilities and museums asked to reduce hours of opening.

Council leader Norman Hampshire said: “This has been the most difficult budget that I have ever been involved in.

“We are dealing with massive growth pressure due to the new housing we are required to deliver by the Scottish Government. We are also dealing with high

inflation and interest rates due to the mismanagement of the economy by this failing Tory Westminster Government.”

He added: “We are trying as hard as we can to focus on core priorities – including tackling poverty, giving children the best possible start in life and vulnerable people.

“But, when income is not keeping pace with the rising cost of delivering services, difficult decisions which inevitably impact on services are being taken so that we are on a sustainable financial footing.

“The bulk of council funding comes from national government with council tax income amounting to approximately a quarter. Our grant from central government is the third lowest in

Scotland per head of population. There is no recognition of East Lothian's increasing population and additional costs, including the staffing and running of new schools.

"I would like to thank local residents for their patience understanding – as well as our hard-working council staff for their commitment."

by Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter



East Lothian Council Leader Norman Hampshire