

Independent councillor calls for social care funding boost

Cllr Ross McKenzie urges Edinburgh Council to “call Humza Yousaf’s bluff” and increase council tax to close the funding gap.

Edinburgh’s only independent councillor has called on parties to boost funding for health and social care in their budgets amid a black hole of nearly £70m.

Ross McKenzie took aim at “cowardly” political groups in the City Chambers, accusing them of failing to acknowledge the cash crisis facing the Edinburgh Integration Joint Board (EIJB) ahead of the council’s budget meeting on Thursday (February 22).

He urged councillors to “call Humza Yousaf’s bluff” over the Scottish Government’s council tax freeze by accepting the £16.1m being offered while increasing rates to 7.8 per cent, which he said could be reduced to a “modest” 3.2 per cent in the event the settlement was still provided.

Cllr McKenzie, who stood down from Labour at last year’s budget meeting over anger at his former group’s cooperation with the Tories, said the additional income would allow the authority to increase funding for cash-strapped health and social care services to just over £22m.

He called on the Scottish Government and NHS Lothian to match this funding in order to fully close the EIJB’s forecast £67.6m gap for 2024/25 .

He said: "We hear a lot about 'getting the basics right' on this council but that never seems to translate to additional funding for the basic services we provide in education and social care. We know from those who work in those areas, and from those who use the services, just how much pressure they are under with increasing demand on top of years of reduced funding.

"The projected health and social care funding gap is terrifying – we're really talking about removing basic support from people who need our help most. The failure to even acknowledge this in most of the budget motions is cowardly.

He added: "I hate council tax – it's regressive and full of anomalies, but the failure of any political party to come forward with a serious alternative means it's currently the only way for local authorities to raise significant additional income. I'm saying that we should call Humza Yousaf's bluff on the Council Tax freeze. The Scottish Government has shown its hand by allocating £16.1m to fund a freeze in Edinburgh. If they hand over that money while accepting a 3.2% rise then that would go a long way to preventing cuts to basic services.

"If they're not willing to do that we should raise the tax by 7.8% – it will be for Humza and his Government to take responsibility for the choice between the two figures – we know they have money ready to ensure it is the lower one."

Also contained within the Sighthill/Gorgie councillor's proposals is a one-off payment of £100 for struggling households using £3m of reserve funding, an additional £1m for the education budget and increased charges for garage rentals, parking, electric vehicle charging and other services to raise £1m for the reintroduction of a fund which helps private tenants at risk of eviction pay their rent.

Meanwhile cuts to funding for the council's communications team, Lord Provost's office and other savings across

departments would see £2.8m spent improving accessibility in the City Chambers, insulating council buildings, hiring forestry staff, freezing garden aid, hiring additional licensing staff to process short-term let applications and in-housing more waste and cleansing services.

Furthermore Cllr McKenzie said the city's roads budget should be slashed to £7.8m – down from £10m proposed by officers and £12.5m by the Labour administration – to increase money available for council house repairs by £3.5m and fund the construction of a new pedestrian bridge over the Water of Leith for Longstone residents. Reduced expenditure on pothole filling would also result in a cash boost to flood prevention projects and the team working to deliver the council's goal to plant a million trees.

He said: "My motion is essentially an attempt to amend the Labour budget by raising extra revenue through council tax, but also by cherry-picking the best bits from the SNP and Green motions.

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter



Cllr Ross McKenzie. Photo: © 2022, Martin P. McAdam
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“It still pains me that those three parties are not working together on the council – they should have a lot in common but they are divided by constitutional questions that have no place in local politics. Hopefully they’ll take a look at my proposals and see what a budget that merges their priorities could look like.”