

# **Midlothian: 'Grown up council' passes council tax freeze and rent rise**

**Council tax bills and the cost of school meals frozen for the coming year as rent for local authority tenants rises by just under five per cent.**

Councillors had worked behind the scenes to agree the budget for the year ahead before meeting to approve it, in a move which was described as 'grown up'.

But while they were able to agree the general services budget which includes a possible five per cent council tax next year there were questions raised over a capital plan which saw plans for a new high school in Gorebridge 'removed'.

A paper on the capital plan said the removal of Gorebridge High School and extensions to some primary schools, would save the council £80million in investment.

However Councillor Derek Milligan, Labour group leader, said the proposals which were due to be debated in private later in the meeting would not be supported by his party without more details being provided.

And Councillor Ellen Scott, SNP administration spokesperson for education, objected to the use of the word 'removal' in the paper insisting it was a project which would be revisited in the future.

It was later confirmed no decision was taken on the private paper asking councillors to approve the changes including shelving the high school, which will be brought back to

council at a later date.

Supporting the general services budget, Council leader Kelly Parry said she was proud of the balanced budget which she said supported local residents.

She said: "During this cost of living crisis the pressures on residents has been intolerable.

"That is why I am pleased in this budget we will freeze the cost of school meals for the financial year. While we are reviewing our catering and leisure services we are freezing the cost to residents and do so while taking on the inflationary pressures ourselves.

"There is much to debate about the council tax freeze but this will also relieve pressure on families and those in in-work poverty."

Councillor Parry pointed to an increase of 5.5 per cent in payments to foster carers as a sign of the local authority's appreciation of the work they do and praised fellow councillors from all parties for working together on the budget plans.

An amendment brought by the Labour group which requested an addition £2.5million council funding for Midlothian Integration Joint Board to support work helping children with complex needs moving into adult services and support the elderly was agreed by elected members.

Councillor Colin Cassidy told the meeting: "I think this is a good day for Midlothian Council. It is the first time I have walked into the chambers on budget day without crowds of protestors outside and staff and workers in fear of losing jobs.

"This is a grown up council we have here and one of the few in the country to return a budget like this to date."

Councillor Milligan said: "I am really proud of the fact that around this table we do go into business transformation, we do work in other areas together and we put politics at the back of us to put the people of Midlothian at the front of us.

"When you see how other councils are struggling to get people to sit together in the same room, I think it is more

comfortable to be sitting here.”

And Conservative Councillor David Virgo added: “I commend the collegiate working of my colleagues.”

by Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter



Cllr Kelly Parry, Leader of Midlothian Council