

West Lothian budget agreed

Council tax freeze accepted, service costs rise and new changes introduced for bins

Almost £2 million of additional savings have been agreed in West Lothian Council's budget for the next year.

Garden waste charges of £50 per household will come in along with a hike in service charges across the board.

Second homes owners will see their Council Tax double while the council accepted the Council Tax freeze imposed by the Scottish Government

The average weekly council house rent will rise 3.5% from £83.22 to £86.13.

Next year, nearly £556 million will be spent on delivering day-to-day local services.

Over 75% of the council's revenue budget will be spent on education, social care and operational services which includes roads, waste services and open spaces.

The council administration says insufficient funding from the Scottish Government combined with increasing costs means the council has a budget gap of £16.6million for 2024/25 (and budget gap of £38 million from 2024/25 to 2027/28). The core revenue grant funding has been cut by over £1 million in 2024/25.

While the council has a no compulsory redundancy policy, the scale of the budget pressures facing the council will impact on staff numbers. Overall the number of council staff will

reduce over the next two years.

The SNP suggested alternative budget plans which included an added rent rise of 4.5% later this year which the party argued would generate £9m for a council house building programme.

Other opposition proposals included the immediate introduction of parking fines through Decriminalised Parking Enforcement and parking charges at country parks.

The SNP also rejected brown bin charges but argued for almost £500,000 to be spent on three staff members over two years to "maximise income generation from promotion of existing West Lothian Council facilities from the Modernisation Fund."

It also called for investment to promote West Lothian as a tourist destination.

Councillor Janet Campbell, the SNP group leader told the meeting of the full council: "The reasons for the challenges we face today lie firmly at the feet of the failing out of touch government at Westminster and 14 year austerity programme that has been forced upon the people of Scotland.

"Credit must be given to the deputy first minister who yesterday announced an additional £62.7 m of funding for councils across Scotland. We know this funding is coming. Let's not play political games."

She said the SNP proposals showed it was possible to freeze the council tax and still maintain services, adding: "The budget acknowledges the difficulties many of our families continue to live with whilst showing forward thinking, positivity and ambition for public services in West Lothian."

Labour Councillor Anne McMillan said the council tax freeze was brought in without consultation with Cosla or Scottish Ministers. Despite claims by senior Ministers and local MSPs that the freeze was fully funded, it had not been, she added.

Newly independent councillor Andrew McGuire told the meeting: "When I was reading the budget papers the thing that caught my eye was the table which shows that by the end of this administration there will be £197m less in the council budget than there was in 2007.

"I don't think apportioning blame helps anyone and I don't think our constituents like it but the reality is that there is not enough money to fund services properly.

"A council tax system that was designed in 1991 is no longer sustainable and it's a great pity that none of the political parties including the one that I recently departed from won't grasp the nettle and do what needs to be done on council tax which would properly fund local government.

"You don't have to walk far along the street to hear someone complaining about how they cannot get access to a GP or capital projects have been frozen. There's concerns about St Kent's and keeping the building up.

"I just think it's depressing we have got the position where one political party would rather just champion the cause of a government rather than champion the cause of their constituents."

Councillor Pauline Stafford said: "In criticising the council budget settlement, Labour are failing to factor in the measures taken by the SNP Government to reduce deprivation and uprate NHS funding, which has significantly alleviated pressure on local authority services."

No such measures are in place in England, she added, and councils are faring far worse.

A wide range of budget savings have already been agreed at last year's budget setting meeting and will be implemented further from April 2024. These include: internal savings through reviewing admin support and streamlining processes to

reduce costs; internal management restructures; reduction in staff numbers and management restructures; reducing the number of offices and the number of council buildings overall; energy savings from council buildings.

Independent Stuart Borrowman said the council could no longer look to blame the Scottish Government, and the opposition blaming Westminster : "My concern is the model of budget cuts we have had over the last 15 years has run its race and we need to do it differently. It's a process of grudging incrementalism.

"Everybody I speak to, politician or officer, tells me this will be worse next year. What that calls for is a more fundamental approach to what priorities are."

Leader of West Lothian Council Lawrence Fitzpatrick said: "Setting a budget with insufficient levels of funding is a very difficult task.

"However, it is important to focus on the fact that this council will continue to deliver a huge range of vital services that impact on the lives of thousands of people every day.

"Education and social care will continue to be our main priorities. These services, in addition to our roads, parks and recycling services, represent the vast majority of our budget and will see significant levels of investment.

"Protecting and enhancing services for the most vulnerable people in West Lothian is a key priority for us, as is our local environment. 75% of our budget is now ring-fenced and must be spent on Scottish Government policy commitments, but we have done all we can to protect services and jobs against a background of significant cuts to our budget."

by Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter



Photo: MJ Richardson / Livingston Civic Centre from the west.
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