

West Lothian Council faces slashing all non statutory services to meet care and housing costs

The growing financial crisis threatening West Lothian Council has been laid bare after the Head of Finance revealed an £8.1 million overspend at the six month point of the current financial year.

Kenneth Ribbons, the council's interim Chief Financial Officer described the state of the council books as "unprecedented" and said: "We have never experienced a forecast budget position of this magnitude."

But while spiralling costs of statutory duties – those the council must carry out – account for the vast majority of the overspend, the SNP group accused the administration of "incompetence."

Finance officers have proposed a package of money saving measures including a recruitment freeze and widespread cuts in all non-essential services.

These could eventually mean non-statutory service cut back in areas such as subsidised transport.

This latest update confirms that West Lothian Council has an overspend this year (2024/25) of over £8.1 million. That means

that more savings are now required to allow the council to balance its budget – something the council is legally required to do.

Two key areas are fuelling the overspend – homeless accommodation and care of the elderly. All councils have a legal duty to provide temporary accommodation to anyone presenting as homeless and, on average, 187 clients per night were accommodated in B&B between April and September.

The increasing elderly population means that demand is increasing for services such as care homes and additional agency/locum costs, and housing with care services.

The forecast position for the council's Adults & Older People Service is an overspend of over £6 million.

There is significant growth in commissioned adult social care, in demand for packages of care, both due to client numbers and overall individual complexity, with forecast overspend of £5.119 million.

Mr Ribbons told a meeting of the Executive: "The current position is not sustainable and councils across the country face very similar challenges.

"Urgent measures are needed to address the situation so that we're able to balance our budget."

"It is also important to identify other sources of income as a longer-term option which would potentially generate additional funding to help protect local services."

Councillor Pauline Stafford, the SNP depute group leader said: "This is a really sobering paper highlights the serious situation this council is in. To have a projected overspend jump by £2.6m million in the space of two months since the last review and to be in a position where we are proposing sweeping measures like the cessation of non-essential spending

without any information on how that is likely to affect our constituents.

“I think it shows the incompetence of this Labour administration and a failure to plan.”

She added: “The issues facing this council are serious but they’re not a shock, we have known these are coming we have a rising age demographic. This administration has failed to understand the situation on the ground in West Lothian or to meet these challenges.”

Linlithgow Lib Dem Sally Pattle said: “I was really shocked when I read this. This is beginning to become frightening about what this council will be able to deliver. I would like to thank the officers for the clarity in the report; it couldn’t be clearer. I know that we are not alone, but it does increasingly feel that we are in a desperate situation, particularly with regard to social care.

“I am really concerned about the stress that is being placed on officers who are being asked to find these savings constantly when we know that there is very little left we are able to cut and those be asked to deliver increasingly meagre services.”

“I really hope that Holyrood and Westminster are taking note of this perilous situation and are going to offer support in the coming months.”

Councillor Ann McMillian, Labour said she was surprised at the SNP ‘s “derogatory” comments about incompetence and a failure to plan given the Scottish Government’s “last minute” announcement of the council tax freeze last year. “Substantial and prolonged underfunding by the Scottish Government has led us here”, she added.

She added: “I hope future funding will reflect these costs especially in social care”

Labour veteran Councillor Tom Conn said: “Our financial position is not of our making. This was a car crash that everybody could see was going to take place except the SNP group who looked the other way. There was no accident here.

He highlighted how Scottish ministers suggested they would consider another council tax freeze if additional money came from Westminster.

“You never learn. Council tax freeze doesn’t help councils. There is more money coming from Westminster. It’s how you use it to support services rather than fantasy projects.”

Councillor Moira Mckee-Shemilt, SNP, said: “I have been in the council since 2017 and I have never ever, ever heard the Labour Tory coalition take responsibility for anything ever. It’s always the Scottish Government there must be some amount of self-reflection for the decision making you have done. There has been enough to be self reflective upon.”

Council leader Lawrence Fitzpatrick paid tribute to: “top-class officers who work very very hard.” He added: “Officers in our public service are dedicated.”

He said that the problem for local government had been the eight council tax freezes imposed which shattered the economies of councils which faced year on year price increases because of the cost of living.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter