

East Lothian councillors back 10% council tax increase

East Lothian Council has become the first Scottish local authority to approve a 10% council tax rise in its first ever cross party budget.

Months of talks between opposing parties saw a budget which was backed by the Labour administration and SNP opposition with support from the county's Scottish Green councillor and independent member.

Only the Conservatives refused to back the budget, despite having been involved in the talks in a move which left council leader Norman Hampshire expressing his surprise.

Conservative group leader Councillor George McGuire said the budget put the council's 'financial struggles' ahead of the struggles being faced by every East Lothian household.

The increase will mean households in Band D will pay £1,579.18 annual up from £1,435.62.

Council leader Norman Hampshire put forward the budget for approval saying the council tax increase would bring more than £9million additional revenue for public services.

He said people in the county had made it clear in consultations that they wanted investment in services not further cuts and were willing to pay extra to ensure that happens.

Among areas to see further investment will be adult social

care which will received an additional £3.89million, children's serviced with an additional £2.75million, an additional £1.9m for education, and more than £800,000 each for both homelessness and supported accommodation and inclusion and wellbeing.

There are also additional funding boosts for Enjoy Leisure who run the sports centres and the Brunton Theatre Trust who both received an extra £200,000.

Calls were made for adult social care funding to be used to reinstate a day centre for older people in Musselburgh after services were withdrawn in the county's biggest town last year.

Officers moved to reassure councillors that bringing a day centre back to the town was a priority as it was recognised there was a "significant need" for it.

Councillors were told that an increase in national funding received from Scottish Government included around £7.5 million in money which was not ring fenced for specific areas.

They also heard that the government had provided the council with funds which covered 60% of the costs of a recent UK Government increase in National Insurance contributions demanded from employers leaving them to cover the remaining 40% from their own budget.

The council tax increase and additional national funding meant the council balanced its books with services asked to find savings of £900,000 across the board in the year ahead.

Councillor Hampshire said: "I welcome the cross party approach to this budget.

"It is vital that we can sustain essential services to protect our most vulnerable residents and invest in education to give all children the best start in life. Even in this most

difficult of financial circumstances, we have worked hard to deliver a cross-party budget which is what the people of East Lothian would expect of their elected representatives.”

And SNP opposition leader Councillor Lyn Jardine described parties working together local and nationally as a ‘sign of political maturity’.

She said: “Our communities expect us to work together to tackle the challenges we all face.

“It’s essential we do everything we can to tackle poverty and inequality. Local politicians are at the sharp end of decisions that impact directly and it’s extremely difficult to meet increased expectations with reduced resources.

“We are therefore committed to working in a collaborative way across parties, with our communities and groups and to have difficult conversations and develop a shared purpose and vision in all that we do.”

Councillor McGuire said he could not support the budget instead calling for alternative savings including withdrawing funding for area partnerships, COSLA and union subsidies.

He said: “We are being asked to put the financial struggles of this council ahead of the financial struggles of people in our communities.”

The cross party budget was approved by 17 votes to four with Councillors McGuire, Jeremy Findlay, Lachlan Bruce and Donna Collins opposing it.

By Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter