

West Lothian 8.95% Council Tax increase agreed

West Lothian households will pay an average £10.37 extra a month in Council Tax, plus extra costs for bulky uplift and garden waste with the agreement of the 2025/26 budget.

Council Tax will see an 8.95% increase in West Lothian, slightly below a national average of around 8.8%, but hefty enough to be felt in many homes after a decade of Holyrood imposed tax freezes.

For the Band D taxpayer 8.95% is an increase of almost £125 extra a year – while other regular household costs will climb. Conservative councillors won an agreement that the planned £50 bulky uplift charge was not imposed. The charge for five item uplift will remain at £38.59. The garden waste permit will rise to £52.

Charges for council services will rise an average of up to 5%, across the board these include registration fees, burial and cemetery costs as well as certain licensing fees.

The council still faces a shortfall counted in millions of pounds and has had to find an extra £2.1 million of cutbacks for this year alone.

Council leader Lawrence Fitzpatrick told the special meeting of the full council: “I realise that some council taxpayers will be concerned about our proposed increase of 8.95%. No-one

running an administration in Scotland takes any great joy in having to push for this level.

“I understand that the average increase will be around eight and half per cent throughout Scotland. Why?”

“The answer is quite simple we have had ten years of Council Tax freezes imposed by the Scottish Government and within that period we have had to deal with inflation and wage raise which has caused substantial budget difficulties extending to £172m

“Also it is a fact that when the SNP took control of the government in 2007/8 at that time councils received 28.62% of the block grant that came from Westminster. Last year, 24/25, the total managed expenditure to councils was 21.38%. That is a cut since the SNP came into power of one quarter, 25%; and everything is blamed on Westminster.”

Both The SNP and Conservative councillors criticised the extra costs loaded onto West Lothian by the rise in National Insurance contributions and rising thresholds.

Answering a question from the Conservative group leader Damian Doran-Timson the acting head of Finance Kenneth Ribbons said the costs facing the council were an extra £6.6m with an extra £2.2m in contractor costs in social care as a result of the increases.

SNP group leader Councillor Janet Campbell said the increased costs from NI contribution amounted to £700m of which Holyrood had only been passed on £300m from Westminster.

To date there has been no indications these extra costs will be met in full by Westminster. Some councils, including neighbouring Edinburgh, have had indications that a decision will be taken by the Chancellor in time for her Spring statement on 26 March.

The opposition SNP group proposed an alternative budget

calling for investment in registration services and the development of streaming services such as marriage which the party argued could generate more funds through an upgrade of service suite.

The party had proposed a swift introduction of a wider Decriminalised Parking Enforcement with added charges and protection of community centres. However both of these issues were ruled out by Standing Orders as already being in the council decision making process.

Their 11 page budget paid broad attention to the achievements of the Scottish Government in Holyrood and the threat to the Grangemouth refinery complex in the neighbouring Falkirk council area.

Councillor Campbell told the meeting: "The rise in council tax today is entirely caused by Labour party decisions, financial mismanagement and incompetence by Labour politicians at every level.

"In addition, monies paid back in PFI projects by a Labour administration £18.6m last year alone.

"This SNP budget is one in which we seek to strengthen our social contract with the people of West Lothian. It is based on fairness but has, by necessity, had to take account of the decisions by the Labour party. It protects public services rather than spending to save rather than austerity."

The group called for the protection of threatened nurseries and the introduction of one-off payments to protect services.

Councillor Doran-Timson criticised the SNP budget for wanting to charge parking fees for the country parks. He slated the Holyrood administration for its expenditure of £6.6bn on quangos and the £30m spend on the abandoned National Care Service.

He added: "But our budget challenges today are not just caused by years and years of cuts to local governments by the SNP, without doubt one of the biggest challenges we face is down to the Labour government to increase three National Insurance and reduce the threshold.

"Provost, just like across Scotland the residents of West Lothian face the worst possible scenario, a nightmare: an economically incompetent Labour Government and an SNP in Holyrood who have literally no idea, not a plan and not a clue."

West Lothian had originally planned to increase Council Tax by 5.8% this year. However, it has now been confirmed by the Scottish Government that only 60% of NI contributions will be funded and passed down to councils, therefore an increase of 8.95% is proposed to meet the unavoidable cost associated with changes to employee's national insurance contributions, particularly for health and social care service.

The majority of West Lothian's savings measures were agreed two years ago and are implemented over a five-year period. However, more measures have had to be agreed in order to allow the Council to balance its budget.

A wide range of budget savings have already been agreed at last year's budget setting meeting and will be implemented further from April 2025.

Examples include:-

- Internal savings through reviewing admin support and streamlining processes to reduce costs

- Internal management restructures

- Reduction in staff numbers in some areas, no-filling of vacancies and management restructures
- Review of existing contracts for commissioned services to achieve cost savings
- Intensive fostering campaign and development of a WL adoption services
- Significant savings across Education which includes revised scheme of devolved school management

Over £2.1 million of additional savings are proposed to help meet the increased funding gap have been approved for next year (2025/2026)

These include:-

- Internal efficiency savings in staffing, property, supplies and services and transport budgets.
- Reduction in council tax empty property discounts in line with parameters set out in regulations
- Review of empty property relief and exemptions for Non-Domestic Rates
- Increased income from rent of council properties.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter