

West Lothian council tax set to rise by 8.9%

West Lothian councillors will be asked to agree to an 8.95% council tax hike when it sets its budget on Tuesday.

The increase would be the biggest applied by the council in years after several years of Holyrood imposed freezes.

It is 3% higher than the 5.8% the council wanted to impose last year and had initially touted this year.

The 8.95% is proposed to meet the unavoidable cost associated with changes to employee's national insurance contributions, particularly for health and social care services.

It will mean an average D band household paying an extra £10.37 a month.

An 8.95% Council Tax increase would cover the 40% shortfall in NI contributions and prevent a further £3 millions of budget savings coming out of local services.

But the council will still face making cuts to its budget of £12m.

Council Tax would have to increase by 21% this year (2025/26) to offset the total budget gap that the council is facing.

The council has a budget gap of £34.9 million over the next three years.

The council 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.

The majority of savings measures were agreed two years ago and are to be 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 being proposed to

help meet the increased funding gap and 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