



A New Year and a new Budget for: South Lanarkshire Council

As we enter the first quarter of 2018, the council enters the last quarter of its' Financial Year and this means budget setting for the next government FY: April 2018 to March 2019. As a local councillor, this used to be a straight forward process because for the last ten years that I've been a local member: Labour have been in charge and quite frankly: did what they wanted! This year however is different because the SNP minority administration means cross-party agreements will have to be made if the 2018/18 budget is to get passed and I think this has got to be a good thing.

For the councillors, the annual budget setting process starts each October/November with a set of suggestions from the council officers. For the last few years, this has meant potential budget cuts and therefore: what services the officers think could be made to meet next year's potential settlement from the Scottish Government. It's then up to the various groups/parties to put forward their alternative proposals but in my time as a councillor (since 2007), I simply can't remember any alternatives ever being brought forward so the budget has been past with very few amendments. However, I feel the 2018/19 budget is going to be very different!

For the first time in over a decade, SLC like the other 31 Scottish local authorities can raise council tax by up to 3%. I'd however, like to make it clear that I do not believe council tax rises are required! Raising council tax in SLC by the maximum 3% will only deliver another £4m (approx.) and given the waste in our council, there is simply no need (in my opinion) to raise council tax at all.

For the past two decades of Labour leadership in SLC, there has been little to no modernisation so efficiencies from Technology has simply past our council by and left SLC inefficient to the cost of millions every year; millions that could be used to improve council services. We just have to look at the hall-booking system, which is somewhat manual and requires far too much human intervention in an era that see's us take for granted: ordering goods online, booking flights online and even booking cinema tickets online. In many situations, the actual cost of renting a hall or sports facility in SLC is far more expensive than the council actually recoups in the rent itself. There is also the millions lost each year through council staff sickness. Many reading this will simply be flabbergasted to know that SLC loses approximately 10 days (two working weeks) for every council employee in sick days, every year! With more than 15,000 employees across SLC, this adds up to a staggering amount of lost days and lost productivity. Of course, there are tragic and absolute genuine cases of long term illness, which we must protect but the amount lost in days here and there is staggering and it falls to us (the tax payer) to fund this enormous cost every year. There is also Labour's no-redundancy policy that has left our council with the wrong people in the wrong jobs. At a time, when we need more social workers, home-care professionals and teachers, SLC have admin staff and managers doing what, I've no idea. This is just another example of why I think we need to think outside-the-box and look beyond local government for inspiration in a modern world that keeps costs down through efficient 21st century working practices.

With the SNP Scottish Government in Holyrood being led by the Green's, raising taxes for the millions of hard working people across Scotland, council tax rises are just another slap in the face from a government that needs to look at themselves and become more efficient in the delivery if its services, saving money and providing better services at the same time. Our hard-working NHS staff are burdened with outdated paper processes that costs the service hundreds of millions each year

and takes away from patient care, while increasing waiting lists. Our council is no different: decades of poor government and leadership has seen South Lanarkshire stuck in the past: top heavy, inefficient and therefore I believe we can deliver better services with less money and therefore the good people of Avondale should not have to dig even deeper into their pockets to fund our outdated and inefficient council.

So, as we enter 2018: everyone in Strathaven, Stonehouse and across rural Avondale should brace themselves to pay more for what in reality: is just more of the same. I'm sure there are few that would disagree that we'd be happy to pay a little more if services were going to improve but I simply do not see this happening and therefore we'll all end up paying more for what is becoming a poorer service. We can do better as a council but it takes vision and a desire to want to do better, become more efficient and serve our entire community better. If we get it right for the 85% using modern business practices, then we can concentrate on supporting the vulnerable in our society who need that little extra help but from what I've seen since the May 2007 local election: I just can't see this happening.

So far, we've only seen alternatives from the Independent group. I can therefore only assume the Labour group are working on their own budget options, in the same way my group are considering our ideas. One thing is sure: the 2018/19 budget in South Lanarkshire has a long way to go and as to how smooth the process is this year; I can only hope the councillors from all parties put their council tax payers first and think (even a little) outside the box for solutions to better council services, which are possible through efficient government, fit of the 21st century.

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