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**Scottish Conservatives Announce Budget for the Highlands**

During the most recent budget, the Scottish Conservative Group tabled several amendments to give something back to the Highlands. For too long the annual budget has just announced a series of cuts, never, unlike other Councils has it been used to launch new investments. The budget amendments presented made a true budget for the Highlands, with something for everyone. The Group set out how they would use your money better, to reduce charges for burials and cremations, as well as those faced by some fragile rural businesses.

Also addressed were measures for some of the most vulnerable citizens, namely looked after children and those who are currently homeless. The Highland Council currently has the lowest foster care of allowance of any council in the UK. A carer of a 4 year old child getting just £77 per week, against a Scottish Average of £129. The finance policy for building council homes was also completely rewritten to make better use of revenues to build 60% more homes for the same amount of money each year.

Andrew Jarvie responds to the Council Administration’s budget and announces his Group’s own amendments -

“Having a new Chief at the helm I believe has made a tremendous difference and we have had really positive engagement from the staff throughout. However it was quite disappointing on the day for an administration who think they know best, despite their faux calls for help, to refuse a number of our amendments for petty reasons.”

“However, I still feel this budget doesn’t quite have the comprehensive vision for what this Council will do for the Highland people that I would hope for. That is why we will be bringing forward several fully funded amendments that give something back.”

“The in-class support offered to children with Additional Support Needs it is absolutely crucial, but from the dozen conversations I have had with Head Teachers what this Council offers is not working. Comparing Highland to other areas shows that we are a long way behind. So the is universal agreement that change has to happen, but not in the way it is proposed. We identified £500k to set up an ASN training fund for teachers – what they told me they needed as current training is almost non-existent.

“For whatever reason, the administration refused this because they did not know what training was needed. Meaning they proposed this cut without knowing what would happen. When it went to a vote, the SNP supported the Administration to cut ASN – only the Conservatives wanted to invest in it”

“Last year I discovered that this Council has the lowest rates of foster care and kinship allowance in the UK. I believe it was time to put action into words and increase this to the recommended levels. Not only is this unfair with 60% of Scottish foster carers saying the allowance doesn’t cover the cost of raising a child, but self-defeating because we have so many children in £220,000 a year out of authority placements. If we offer a fair rate, fostering will become affordable for people who have previously enquired. Not only does a foster placement offer much better outcomes for a child’s life, but we only need half a dozen new foster carers for this to pay off. After working with the Director of Care and Learning a full report will now come to the Council setting out exactly how this will work.”

“We have reviewed the financial processes of the Housing Revenue Account to realise that using more appropriate funding methods, we can build 60% more houses and increase improvements to existing council homes by 90%, all within the same amount of revenue. Nearly 8000 people are on the housing waiting list and over 700 of these are homeless, so we have to boldly tackle this. The HRA is self-financing and the rental income from Council housing runs at a surplus, but this has not been used in the right way to build more homes and maintain what we have.”

“Cllr. Mackie was working getting a better bereavement service with fairer prices, it just seems wrong to balance the budget on the backs of grieving families. To that end, he proposed slashing the increase in half and increasing the exempt fee age from 16 to 18, all of this could be financed by offering ancillary services such as benches and memorial walls that people are asking for. The administration refused this again and at the vote it was 6 votes short.”

“Lastly, in light of Brexit, we need to support key industries. The amount we charge for fish export licenses is per kilo more expensive than flying them to China, we wanted to support fishing with a 20% cost reduction in these licenses. In just 3 years the cost has inexplicably increased by nearly 300%, making exporting too expansive for smaller businesses.”

“To pay for this we wanted the travel desk, which books Councillor’s hotels, to ditch their so-called ‘preferential rates’ which are upto twice as much as hotels.com and use that instead. Why the administration again refused this was beyond our grasp of common sense. It is completely self to willingly pay twice as much for hotels and charge fragile businesses through the nose for essential services.”

ENDS