

NEIL BENNY Friday March 07 2025, The Times

Our council taxes soar but services get worse as funding fails to keep up with inflation, the government legislates like a drunkard at an open bar, creating waves of new expensive requirements writes leader of the Conservative group on Stirling council Neil Benny.

On Thursday Falkirk set Scotland's largest council tax increase to date after councillors agreed a 15.6 per cent rise. The annual bill for an average band D property rose to £1,576 and came at the end of a process that left bills across the country subject to above-inflation rises. Council tax is one of the largest bills many of us pay each month and rises this year will break records while the SNP has starved local authorities of the money they need. But this is really only half the story. Almost £25.5 billion is spent across the country's 32 councils. The pay bill accounts for just under half of that and we spend £1.8 billion on pension contributions. I have served on a Scottish council for 18 years and every year the budget gets bigger and every year the number of staff employed grows. Yet services are cut. Roads go unrepaired. We collect waste less frequently than we used to. Funding has failed to keep up with inflation, demand pressures and increased government expectation. The SNP-led Scottish government sends a constant barrage of unfunded instructions and the Scottish parliament in Edinburgh legislates like a drunkard at an open bar, creating waves of new expensive requirements.

In social care, demand has risen significantly as people live longer but less healthy lives. There are more people needing care and their requirements are far more complex and expensive to meet than in the past. The Scottish government sets an arbitrary target for teacher employment based on outdated pupil numbers, while cutting the number of hours that teachers spend in the classroom. This means more teachers are needed to cover the same number of classes. Objectively outcomes have not improved as a result of this policy.

The main issue is public sector pay, which has been outstripping inflation. Meanwhile, Cosla — the body that represents Scotland's local authorities — supports a minimum wage that would put the lowest amount a local government worker can be paid at £28,800 per year. Discussions about high pay tend to focus on the salaries of chief executives, which is the tip of a very large iceberg. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) found that public sector pay in Scotland is 5 per cent higher than in the UK as a whole. I serve on Stirling Council where the number of people on salaries of more than £50,000 has doubled since 2020. National pay bargaining never looks for productivity gains through pay, nor have terms and conditions changed significantly. Frankly, I believe local government pay deals should not be negotiated nationally while councillors continue to scramble around to balance budgets and staff bills and headcounts continue to rise. Real reform of local government is long overdue but to take on the vested interests requires the kind of bravery that is sadly lacking in Scottish politics.

Neil Benny is leader of the Conservative group on Stirling Council