

News Release

COUNCIL AT ODDS WITH SWINNEY ON VOLUNTARY SECTOR CUTS

Highland Council is at odds with Finance Secretary John Swinney over budget cuts they are imposing on the voluntary sector, says Highlands and Islands Labour MSP, Peter Peacock, and he believes there is worse to come from measures in the Council's budget.

He was commenting following the answer to a Parliamentary question he has received from John Swinney in which the Finance Secretary says the voluntary sector "has a major contribution to make in creating a more successful country".

Mr Peacock said, "I believe investment in the voluntary sector is one of the best investments a council can make, they provide a unique range of services to vulnerable groups and are about the best value for money you can get and it appears John Swinney has sympathy with that view. Yet here we are in the Highlands seeing the SNP Independent council slashing spending on the voluntary sector.

"They have already cut a huge sum from Age Concern who help look after the interests of our elderly people, Highland Community Care Forum may have had a stay of execution for a few months but the axe still hovers above their neck, and every voluntary youth and sports organisations faces a real terms cut from the £50,000 of savings the education department is set to make from their budgets.

"On top of even this the Council is to embark on a major revision of its charges for access to school buildings used extensively by the voluntary sector and they are not reviewing the charges in order to reduce them, but to raise them. This could have the most damaging effect of all on voluntary activity across the Highlands as so many organisations use schools. So some organisations face being squeezed by cuts and savings on the one hand and increased charges on the other.

"As each week goes by we are understanding more detail of the depth of the Highland cuts and their potential effect.

"I would urge the Council to give a far higher priority to protecting the voluntary sector than they have done so far, they can still change their mind on the cuts and the upward review of charges, if they did so that would seem to be in tune with what the Finance Secretary believes about the contribution the voluntary sector, even though it is his budget for Councils which started the problem."

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