

# Council house rent rise of 8% confirmed after bid to reverse decision fails



Councillor Ruraidh Stewart says an eight per cent rise will force tenants to choose between paying rent and eating.

by Jamie Wills  
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Highland Council's plan to raise council home rents by eight per cent will go ahead after a last-minute motion to lower the increase to six per cent was defeated.

A cross-party group of 15 councillors had tabled the motion to alter the eight per cent rate initially agreed by the council's housing and property committee on Wednesday January 29.

However, the motion was defeated at a special council meeting on Thursday February 13 by 37 votes to 25.

Among the councillors who had supported a lower rate were Lochaber representatives Liz Saggars and Andrew Baxter, and Eilean a' Cheò Councillor Ruraidh Stewart.

They argued that such a significant rise would push tenants towards hardship, and

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that a smaller rise was possible by removing plans to spend £1.3 million on energy efficiency housing improvements.

At the debate, the motion was introduced by Councillor Alex Graham, who said tenants were facing a "triple whammy" of rising rents, water bills, and council tax, and that previous increases meant rent had gone up 20 per cent in only three years.

Councillor Stewart added: "What might seem like a small amount in cash terms can be the difference between stability and hardship.

"If home owners saw their mortgage jump up by eight per cent, many of them would be in crisis, and our tenants in social housing deserve the same consideration and the same stability.

"A rise like this forces tenants to make impossible choices: to pay rent or buy food, to heat their homes or travel into work, and no-one should have to choose between these essentials." "Social housing is meant to be affordable. The purpose of social rented accommodation is to provide secure and affordable housing to those who need it most. An eight per cent hike goes against that very principle, and that is what we have heard from our tenants' representatives."

However, advocates of the eight per cent increase said even with the rise, rents in the Highlands would remain below the national average.

They noted that its current average 52-week rental charge of £82.84 per week is significantly lower than the £98.99 per week for all council and housing association landlords.

On top of this, it was argued that energy efficiency improvements would ultimately save tenants more money than spent on the rent increase.

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Councillor Sarah Fanet is an advocate for an eight per cent rise, saying tenants will save money on heating bills.

Ardnamurchan councillor Sarah Fanet said: "Because of the cost of living, we have in the past chosen to limit the rent increase, but this cannot continue. Probably about half of my work is supporting tenants struggling with delayed repairs. I go back to officers and they are very diplomatic, telling me they don't have the budget, 'we have to wait', but what they mean – which they cannot say to me – is you councillors are not giving us enough money to carry out the repairs." "This backlog of repairs is harming our tenants and affecting their wellbeing because they are living in houses that need repairs and they are surrounded by damp and mould."

"And it is also hitting their pockets because, for example, windows and doors replacement and their heating bills are soaring.

"People will save money from this."

Councillor Glynis Campbell Sinclair, chairperson of the housing and property committee, said 61 per cent of tenants were receiving benefits to support rent payments, and ensuring money was available to improve housing stock would reduce energy bills and improve health.

"The council also appreciates and understands the challenges facing tenants related to the cost of living. Our housing and welfare teams work closely together to deliver support to

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– Sarah Fanet

tenants who need it most, and I would encourage anyone who may be struggling to reach out to them," she added.

A tenant consultation on Highland Council rents at the end of 2024 found 52 per cent of respondents say the council should prioritise energy efficiency, second only to reactive repairs.

The survey also found 48 per cent supported an eight per cent rent rise. However, the survey has been criticised for only presenting three rent options: a rise of eight, nine, or 10 per cent.

Currently there are 1,457 council house households in Lochaber, and 14,594 such households across the Highlands.



## Eye to eye with John Wallace

Advertorial

### Reducing The Risk of Retinal Detachment and Vision Loss

Since I started practising optometry I have seen many patients present complaining of visual distortion, vision loss and bumping into objects when they walk around. These are just some of the typical symptoms of retinal detachment. Invariably the symptoms present suddenly and can be very traumatic for you, the patient. There are many causes of retinal detachment including trauma to the eye, but is more frequently associated with moderate to high levels of myopia (shortsightedness).

There are two types of myopia: refractive, when the cornea is very steeply curved and makes the eye optically too powerful, and axial, when the eye is too long and light focuses in front of the retina. If you can imagine a balloon being inflated, as it increases in size the fabric of the balloon becomes increasingly thinner, and will eventually



rupture. A similar situation occurs when the human retina is stretched to breaking point in high levels of axial myopia. Recently I have seen several patients in their 50s and 60s presenting with retinal detachments. Every patient suffered from moderate to high levels of myopia.

Myopia is also linked to cataract formation, glaucoma and myopic macular degeneration. All of which cause significant vision loss.

I have frequently written in this column about myopia management reducing the development of myopia in youngsters. By aggressively reducing the level of developing myopia it is possible to significantly reduce the likelihood of severe vision loss in later life. To achieve maximum protection it is essential that children have regular eye examinations by an optometrist specialising in the management of myopia. We can then plot how your child's eyes are growing and, where necessary, offer timely aggressive interventions to minimise any myopic development. As parents, I am sure you will agree, we all want the best for our children's future.

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