

Secret files reveal where council cash axe will fall

By Andy Dixon

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Housing – £1.5m spending reduction.

CUTS of almost £80 million — £20 million more than previously feared — are being planned by Highland Council over the next three years, documents obtained by The Inverness Courier reveal.

Education, culture and sport is set to suffer the biggest cut of £39 million — almost half the total savings.

A further £18.5 million will have to be trimmed off the already over-stretched housing and social work budget, £11 million off transport, environmental and community services and £1 million of savings will be sought in planning and development.

The proposals are due to be put to councillors for the first time in September and unions yesterday expressed grave concern at the scale of the cuts.

"We know already that employees are under-resourced in many parts of the services and they are stretched to the limit to say the least," said Shane Manning, Highland Unison branch official.

"Any additional savings on budgets is potentially going to impact on resources and staffing, which means even more work for fewer people and we just can't see how it's sustainable."

The figures were reported to senior council officials yesterday and Mr Manning wants the unions brought into discussions immediately.

"The earlier they take the opportunity to involve us in the process, the better prepared we can be to help our workforce deal with the problems," he said.

The documents envisage total spending cuts of 17 per cent over the next three years and come less than two weeks after officials admitted a £3.4 million overspend in this year's social work budget.

Mr Manning questioned whether such deep savings were achievable, claiming the social work overspend reflected increased demand for services and warning that any further cuts would have a serious impact on the authority's ability to deliver services to vulnerable people.

"We already have staff coming to us with concerns about resources and being overstretched," he said. "How we expect those staff to carry on delivering the services if there is even fewer staff available to do it is quite frightening, to be honest."

A senior council employee, who asked not to be named, believed schools would have to close for such large savings to be made.

"This is not trimming fat, this is amputating limbs," he said. "Everybody should be extremely concerned and there is no guarantee this is the end of it."

Bruce Crabtree, Highland representative for the GMB, said the union would be seeking an urgent meeting with council officials to ensure jobs and services were protected.

The local authority is expecting a flat cash settlement from the government and has no way of raising extra money because of a freeze on Council Tax.

Budget leader Councillor David Alston announced two months ago that it needed to save £60 million over the next three years. At the time he warned of massive cuts to services, jobs losses and possible school closures.

He insisted savings could not be made without "substantial changes" to service delivery.

It is understood managers are now compiling a detailed list of proposals which councillors will be asked to vote on in December.

andrew.dixon@inverness-courier