

SKULLY/DREW FARRELL



Campaigners protesting in Glasgow's George Square last week against the closure of the youth theatre, left; young SYT performers in last year's Dye in the Goldfish Bowl, above



Council tax has to go, Greens tell the SNP

John Boothman

Green MSPs say the SNP must agree to abolish the council tax in Scotland as the price for their backing for the annual budget next year.

The case for local taxation reform in Scotland is urgent, Patrick Harvie, the Scottish Greens co-convenor, told delegates at the party's spring conference in Greenock yesterday.

He said the Greens were leading the charge over taxation and their income-tax reform agenda had won the day in this year's Holyrood budget.

He insisted, however, that parliament must go further with a significant reform of local taxes.

Harvie said: "The case for reform of local council funding is a deal-breaker ahead of next year's budget.

"The outdated and unfair council tax must go, and we need to

see genuine centralisation within Scotland."

He added: "With further attacks on Scotland's budget expected to come from the UK government, we cannot simply keep pushing the pressure down the chain to our councils and our local communities.

"New, local fiscal freedoms are urgently needed and would stand us in better stead to face the future."

The Greens favour a system where more tax is raised locally, with local councils responsible for raising half of all revenues. More than 80% of council income comes from government grants.

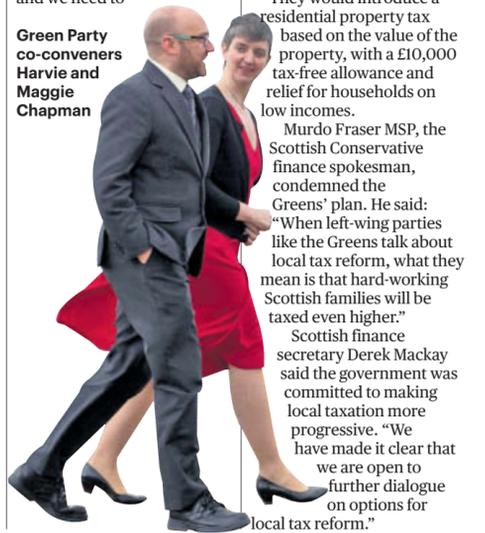
In the long term, the party favours a system of land-value taxation. They say under the current council tax system, the most expensive homes pay only three times that of the least expensive, despite being worth on average 15 times more.

They would introduce a residential property tax based on the value of the property, with a £10,000 tax-free allowance and relief for households on low incomes.

Murdo Fraser MSP, the Scottish Conservative finance spokesman, condemned the Greens' plan. He said: "When left-wing parties like the Greens talk about local tax reform, what they mean is that hard-working Scottish families will be taxed even higher."

Scottish finance secretary Derek Mackay said the government was committed to making local taxation more progressive. "We have made it clear that we are open to further dialogue on options for local tax reform."

Green Party co-convenors Harvie and Maggie Chapman



Dealing with a difficult stage

Boss of beleaguered Scottish Youth Theatre says performing is lifeline for vulnerable children, writes *Julia Horton*

The "life-changing" chance to act offers a "cheaper, quicker" fix for crippling mental illness among young people than overstretched NHS services, according to Scotland's closure-threatened national youth theatre company.

The boss of Scottish Youth Theatre (SYT) claimed it had "saved" thousands of young people battling mental health problems since it was founded more than 40 years ago. SYT chief executive Jacky Hardacre, who is seeking direct government funding for the body as talks to secure its future continue, said: "What we do is not about putting on a play; what we do saves young people.

"I remember one young woman at an audition a couple of years ago who said she came because her mental health was on a downward trajectory. Her low self-esteem was clearly evident.

"Within four weeks she was strutting around the stage like a woman on a mission. No amount of counselling or medication could achieve that, and she understood that – that's why she came.

"We have thousands of other stories like that from people saying SYT changed their lives."

The young woman Hardacre recalled is Kirstie Mathison from Glasgow, who first attended SYT aged 11 before returning in her teens to help overcome debilitating shyness, anxiety and other health issues. Now 20 and acting in short films, she said: "Performing helped me to come out of myself. At SYT I learnt how to interact with other kids in a non-judgmental environment. It gave me confidence."

Zack Norwood from Clydebank, who has Asperger's syndrome, joined the

youth theatre when he was just three years old. The 21-year-old, who is considering becoming an apprentice engineer, said: "When I joined I was more interested in making friends, but it was also really good for my confidence.

"It has helped me with mundane things like striking up a conversation, and with interviews. It's a fantastic institution and it has made a big difference to me."

Supporters were outraged when the theatre company, whose alumni include Gerard Butler and Karen Gillan, warned earlier this month that it would be forced to close after arts quango Creative Scotland had rejected its latest bid for regular funding.

Theatre bosses believe becoming a national company, funded directly by government, would end the financial uncertainty of regular applications to Creative Scotland.

The Scottish Association for Mental Health said it could not comment on the effectiveness of dramatic performance in

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I learnt how to interact with other kids

improving mental health, but it said NHS services were not meeting demand from young people, with thousands waiting for specialist help.

SYT had been planning a tour this summer of a new show about mental health involving about 20 young performers. As The Sunday Times reported last week-end, Scotland's business community, which backed the tour before the closure threat was revealed, is rallying behind a campaign to save the group.

The Scottish government expects to "reach agreement on the best way forward very soon".

A spokeswoman for Creative Scotland said that any commitments put forward by SYT in its funding application and business plan in relation to its work with young people with mental health problems "would have been taken into account as part of the assessment process".

She said many organisations supported through regular funding were doing "fantastic work in terms of social inclusion".

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