

West Lothian Council meeting ends in disarray

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter

A bitter exchange between councillors ended with West Lothian's Provost pulling the plug on a live feed of a full council meeting – shortly after they had agreed a motion to promote civility in public life.

Provost Tom Kerr told officials to shut down the meeting, being held online due to ongoing covid restrictions, as a question on the final motion of the day led to tetchy exchanges between two councillors.

Councillor Willie Boyle accused Provost Kerr, a Conservative, of being “selective” when he tried to raise a point of order which was rejected. The SNP councillor also accused Councillor Kirsteen Sullivan, the deputy Labour leader of being offensive.

The Provost said: “Councillor Boyle, why is it that you cannot just ask a question, get an answer, then ask another. This meeting is now over.”

As Councillor Boyle continued to demand a point of order the Provost called, over the growing row, to administration staff: “Please close the meeting”.

The same meeting had earlier passed a unanimously agreed

motion on civility in public life from Labour's Andrew McGuire stating: "Council understands the detrimental impact of abusive behaviour on the wellbeing of individuals and indeed on democracy, undermining public trust in elected representatives".

The council agreed to invite the COSLA President Cllr Alison Evison to the next meeting of the Council to present a summary of the work done by COSLA to date."

The motion had been raised in the same week as the funeral and memorial service to Essex MP murdered a month ago in his constituency while holding a surgery.

But despite their earlier agreement on civility, a row developed when Cllr Boyle had tabled a question to Cllr Sullivan as the last item on the agenda.

He had asked for a breakdown of details in a lengthy report published by the council on £43 million spent in the Third Sector. He described the report as "all big words and generalisations."

Cllr Kirsteen Sullivan reminded him that he had praised the report at earlier meetings as the most important in the last 15 years – including a time when Cllr Boyle held the committee chair of the Voluntary Organisations Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel which she now occupies.

She said the detail was in the report and if didn't want to read it, Cllr Boyle could read the "summary with pictures".

This led to an audibly infuriated Cllr Boyle to say that the comments were "totally out of order", and despite requests from the Provost to listen he continued, saying: "The idea that we have got to respect each other, and yet someone has the audacity to say 'aww we've got pictures if you can't read it', I think that's is unacceptable behaviour, and it falls on you chair to do something about it."

Over this the Provost could be heard telling officials to close the meeting. Cllr Boyle was then muted by an official, at which the provost quipped: "I wish I had known about that two minutes ago".

Last month, a meeting of the full council ran over six hours and degenerated into bitter exchanges, with off-colour remarks from some male councillors and charges of sexist behaviour made by both Labour and SNP members, as councillors shouted over each other in increasingly febrile debate.

An audio recording of the meeting can be heard here: <https://www.westlothian.gov.uk/livemeetings>.

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