

# Midlothian Council's business plan stalls once more

**A five-year plan for the future of Midlothian has been stalled for a second time amid claims it is nothing more than an unfunded 'wish list'.**

Midlothian Council's strategic plan for the next five years sets out goals to become a carbon neutral 'wellbeing economy', and address inequalities among citizens.

But a meeting of elected members today saw a bid to put it out for public consultation halted amid concerns that it does not reflect the true financial crisis facing the council.

Councillor Derek Milligan, Labour group leader, said people needed to be aware of the challenges facing the local authority and the risk to public services before being asked to back the plan.

And he said the strategic plan should not be put before the public until a financial strategy had been agreed by councillors.

He told the meeting: "Elected members have been given by officers a full understanding of the severe pressure the council is facing and severe reductions in statutory and non statutory services that is likely to happen in the near future.

"We do need to go out to the public but we need to go out with all the information so they are aware.

“Going out to the public and saying this is what we want to do and not saying that actually we don’t have the money to do it, in reality this is just a wish list that does not wash with me.

“We have to be honest with the public here and clear with people what the challenges are going to be for this council and what the council can actually do with the budget it will have.”

Councillors were initially asked to approve the Midlothian Strategic Plan to go out to public consultation last month but sent it back to officers over concerns it did not make clear the proposals in it were “aspirational”.

At the time, the council’s chief executive Dr Grace Vickers said the current cost of living crisis was the biggest challenge she had ever experienced in public service.

At today’s meeting Councillor Milligan brought an amendment to the plan calling for the public consultation to be delayed again until a financial strategy could be agreed.

He was supported by Councillor David Virgo, who said he struggled with a strategic paper which “feels a bit moot” without knowing even the short term financial strategy facing the council.

He said: “I am absolutely in favour of delivering the strategy of empowering communities but on the face of it this feels too vague and even disingenuous in terms of the funding available for communities to decide on when we haven’t even, as a council, enough money to provide public services.”

However Councillor Kelly Parry, council leader, urged fellow councillors to approve the plan saying: “As councillors we have been discussing this for almost two months and we really need it to go out to the public and let them have their say so when we are shaping our financial strategy we do that in a

participatory way.”

Members voted to support Mr Milligan’s amendment and delay the consultation by nine votes to eight.

by Marie Sharp

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