

Council hopes to fund two members of staff to keep Gorgie Farm open

The City of Edinburgh Council spent time discussing how they might step in to save Gorgie Farm when the Policy & Sustainability committee met on Tuesday.

And the council has agreed (subject to legal clarification) that the local authority takes over two full time equivalent members of staff to be responsible for the “essential upkeep of the Farm, the care of the animals, maintaining the links with volunteers and public until a new operator is in place”. But there was also agreement that the running costs will require to be clarified.

Councillors will allow that the remaining discretionary grant fund used for Covid recovery of about £200,000 is used to cover any additional costs until the staff can be transferred

to employment with the council under Transfer of Undertakings (TUPE) rules- at least until they can then be transferred under the same legislation to any new operator. Whether that is possible is a matter for interpretation of the TUPE rules. We are told that the council's legal department is considering this at present.

(Transfer of Undertakings usually covers employees transferred when a business is sold as a going concern, allowing the staff to retain their prior employment for any subsequent redundancies, so maintaining "continuity of employment".)

The previous operator, Hamilton-based charity LOVE Learning, has ended its lease with the council and the gates were closed at 3pm on Monday. The manager confirmed that the animals will be moved out from today – but we understand that again there is discussion between lawyers about whether the charity may do this. The view seems to be that the charity is bound in terms of its contract with the council to retain the status quo for now.

Council Leader Cammy Day talked to The Edinburgh Reporter after the meeting:

Cllr Day said: "What our legal officers are doing is talking to LOVE Learning and others about their contractual responsibilities, which I understand they cannot just walk away from, because they choose to do so. And so that discussion is ongoing as we speak, and I know that as we were in committee today, the Director of Education and her team and legal advisors were talking with LOVE and other people to see what can we do to salvage this for that interim solution.

"There are a number of I think key and appropriate bids, and I think people are aware who they are. Some may be better than others. But what we need is a sustainable proposal that

doesn't mean in a year's time we're back here having the same debate.

"This is now, I think in my lifetime, two or three times that Gorgie Farm has been closed to the public because of whatever the reasons are funding or mismanagement or inability to make it a viable business. So we need someone to come in and make it viable as a business that does exactly what Gorgie Farm does, it supports huge volunteering and obviously supports the operation of a farm and helps people through mental health and other difficulties, but it has to be a viable business."

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE MEETING

At the meeting Council Leader, Cammy Day had lodged an Emergency Motion saying that he would continue to discuss the future of the farm with the campaign group Save Gorgie Farm Forever. Cllr Day also requested "an update to the next Education, Children and Families Committee on 31st January 2023 on the current situation and any ongoing discussion/opportunities to support a new sustainable model for Gorgie Farm which is fit for the future".

There were many hushed discussions among council officers in the Dean of Guild Room as to what might be legally possible, and an amendment was lodged by opposition parties which eventually won the day by 11 votes to 6.

The amendment asked for recognition of the farm as "the jewel in the crown as an attraction in an urban setting", that it has been a lifeline for residents and volunteers in terms of their social activity and isolation and has provided an exceptional training service for those with additional support needs.

The opposition amendment also pointed out that "the Farm attracts groups of school children who have often never had contact with live animals. It also hosts tens of thousands of

visitors from within and outwith Edinburgh”.

The opposition parties asked that the committee commits to “an ongoing Farm and its social and community benefit on the existing site.”

Local Labour councillor Ross McKenzie said after the meeting: “I’m pleased that ward councillors were able to collaborate today to pass this amendment which instructs officers to employ some of the existing Gorgie Farm staff to take responsibility for the essential upkeep of the Farm. However, the timeline is extremely tight, with animals already being removed and staff due to leave at the end of the day tomorrow. It is therefore essential that officers act on this instruction with all due haste.

“The cross-party meeting chaired by the Council Leader last Wednesday, gave a clear steer to him, and to officers, to explore options for keeping some staff in place after LOVE depart the premises, in order to keep the animals in place, and the farm maintained, including keeping contact with the many volunteers who sustain the farm, and are in so many ways sustained by the farm. Until now, no serious action has been taken to make that happen.

“My fear, and I know it shared by many in the community, in the city, and among the workers, volunteers and their families, is that allowing the farm to sit empty, for a period of 2-3 months minimum is to put the social and community benefits that it provides, at risk for the long term. It’s been clear for some time that only the council was able to protect the farm during this period and now there is a clear instruction for officers to do so.”

Cllr Cathy Fullerton who represents the area said: “I’m delighted Committee backed the proposed plan put forward by all ward councillors on behalf of our community. It’s essential we now secure the upkeep of the farm and keep staff

on-site through any transition to another operator. It was obviously disappointing Labour and the Tories tried to vote down our plan but grateful to all other parties for recognising the strength of feeling in Sighthill-Gorgie and across Edinburgh.”

On this comment we asked the Council Leader for his comment. He said: “I think it’s disappointing that the SNP are trying to politicise this. We had cross party meeting last week with MSPs from every party leaders from all parties, except the SNP who didn’t turn up.

“We all unanimously agreed the way forwards was to do exactly what we’re doing which is to try to find a bidder to transfer the property to, and then in the interim find some resource somewhere to keep the animals on site with a staff support for that. But that’s exactly what we did last week.

“What we were nervous about is TUPE – and that will be subject to the legal requirements that that may or may not be possible And whether that solution is possible or not, will not stop us trying to find a solution to keep the animals on site and get Gorgie Farm open as quickly as possible.

“So I don’t think it’s an appropriate comment to make. I think we’ve got cross party support across the council in The Scottish Parliament it was raised with the First Minister who said her minister will engage with us. (That’s yet to happen.) But I think, for me, as a leader of this council, I don’t want to politicise the future of Gorgie Farm, I want to safeguard Gorgie farm and that’s what we’ll be doing.”

There will be more to come on this story and we will bring it when we have any news.



Gail Porter at Gorgie Farm. Photo Martin McAdam