

Muirhouse Millennium Centre may close due to lack of funding

An Edinburgh community centre which has been a “lifeline” to the most vulnerable for more than 20 years could be forced to shut its doors within months due a lack of funding.

Users warned that the heart of the Muirhouse community would be ripped out if the cherished Millennium Centre is allowed to close for good, as staff, volunteers and local residents called on the council to step in as a matter of urgency.

Since opening in 2000 the centre has helped thousands of people facing poverty, hardship, homelessness and mental health struggles, offering unconditional support with budgeting, parenting, housing and essential life skills like cooking and employability. Staff said the centre often “saves lives” and have estimated their wide range of services have saved the council more than £1 million in the last nine months alone.

However The City of Edinburgh Council’s funding for the Muirhouse Millennium Centre has reduced over the years, receiving an annual £107,000 grant at its inception, reducing to £50,000 by 2009 and just over £7,500 in 2019.

“Now we get nothing,” said Peter Airlie, who has managed the

community centre since it opened. “Not being a council building, we’re not funded by the council anymore.”

While some funding comes from Low Income Families Together (LIFT), the charity which has operated in the centre since 2017, and from various groups hiring rooms, Peter said the revenue is not enough to keep the lights on in the long term, and that an annual £40,000 cash injection is needed to secure its future.

“We’ve been using our funds to put on as many activities as we can and keep people alive – literally saving people’s lives,” he said, “but we can’t do it all and it’s time the council stood up and helped.”

He added the centre could have to close by June unless a solution is found.

As well as reaching out to the council, staff have launched a fundraiser seeking £80,000 to sustain the building for the next two years. Nearly £4,000 has been donated so far.



Kelly Bain

Kelly Bain, a service user and now a volunteer, told councillors last week that she “wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for the centre”.

She first walked through its doors four-and-a-half years ago, not long after giving birth to her son. “The day I came here I was very suicidal,” she admitted. “I was homeless when I got into touch with these guys and they saved me.”

On top of this, she had been experiencing domestic abuse and was left with ‘no money or support’.

“It was the hardest time of my life and they got me through it,” she remembered.

“I was homeless for so long, the council were refusing to help, weren’t giving my wee man a cot – there were loads of difficulties. I was put in touch with a solicitor that got us out of homelessness and into temporary accommodation.

“It’s been a great support, I wouldn’t have been able to get by financially if it wasn’t for here – I wouldn’t have my life and my wee boy wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for the centre and the people in it.”

A group recently attended a meeting at the City Chambers to lay bare in front of councillors the grave situation they face. Their deputation opened with Kelly reading aloud a poem she wrote titled ‘I Am Alive’.

An excerpt reads: *‘If the centre is closed and the staff have gone, believe me when I say people will fade alone. Closing the centre we have so much to lose, try living life, walk a day in my shoes. Homeless, suicidal, sad scared and alone, like a dream come true and the end of a phone.’*

Stacey Bain (no relation to Kelly) described the community centre as her “second home”.

She said: "It all started because I was in a flat for 10 years and my landlord decided to sell her flat whilst I was pregnant. A friend suggested I come here. All my benefits got stopped as well so when it came to school time I had no school uniform whatsoever, and it was the centre that helped out to get uniform for my kids.

"I came here feeling terrible, basically broke down and I walked away feeling quite buzzed. I thought 'there are people that do care'. If I didn't have this centre I don't know where I'd be living."

She warned many people would be "left with nowhere to go" if it is forced to close, adding crime rates would go "through the roof" locally as it would give way to a rise in antisocial behaviour.

"I don't understand how the council can allow this centre to be at risk because look at what this centre does for the community," Stacey said.



Peter Airlie

Meanwhile Peter said LIFT's arrival five years ago has allowed the centre to thrive, offer even more services and weekly classes.

He said Muirhouse Millennium Centre and the charity "work perfectly together".

"There's no age bracket. If it wasn't for LIFT being here we could have never delivered these services.

"LIFT will never go away, but it's a damn shame because they've got a purpose-built building that's just been renovated.

"It's got to be in the heart of the community where everybody can walk through that door, no buzzers, no phone calls – walk through the door and you've got a shoulder to cry on. We're here to help.

"I could have someone coming in who's not eaten for four days so you make them something to eat there and then, or someone who's not had their heating on for two weeks who's sitting there with five coats on.

"The stories, when it comes down to it about people taking their own lives – we've had it, we're getting it, we've got it every day. We are actually saving lives. You've got mums, dads, grannies, grandads and carers who come in here who really need help. Some people are too proud to ask for help but we can see it."

LIFT's founder and director, Pauline Bowie, also stressed the centre's "open door policy".

She said: "If you come and you can't afford to pay your rent or can't afford your bills or you've had a notice to quit, you're going to come through that door crying.

"Something like this needs to be in a community centre. It's a

lifeline for people – the centre is the heart of the community and LIFT is the lifeline within that heart.

“LIFT is okay, we have enough money to do us another year, or year and half. We could go and put ourselves somewhere else but you would never get that community feel if you take yourself out the community centre.

“It’s time the council stood up and helped.

“I can’t even imagine what we’re saving the statutory services. I want a working partnership with the council. I think we’re worth it.

“We’ve made this place sustainable because of the work we’re doing and the quality of work. I think they have to stand up and see that.”

Following the plea made at February’s [full council meeting](#), councillors unanimously called on officers to engage with the board of the Muirhouse Millennium Centre to “provide advice and support on how the centre can continue on a sustainable financial basis”.

Local councillor for Muirhouse Lewis Younie said: “The Muirhouse Millennium Centre is an integral and beloved part of the community – its loss would devastate every one of the many families who find it a warm, friendly, and supportive environment.

“The motion I proposed at that meeting, passed unanimously, called on support from council officers to help the centre chart its next steps, which will be pivotal. I will be right there alongside ward colleagues, the staff and community, and anyone else who is willing to get involved.

“This centre not only improves lives but saves them, every day, and it is a travesty they are even having to consider closure.”

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter.

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