

Anger and bewilderment at Howden plans

Children in West Lothian will be losing a vital lifeline if a local arts centre is allowed to close, says a popular youth theatre fighting to keep the venue open.

The first many young people knew that Livingston's Howden Park Centre could close was by phone – the ripple effect of messages buzzing through dozens of mobiles across West Lothian two weeks ago.

For members of [the Firefly Arts team](#) – the youngsters as well as staff – there was a sense of disbelief.

That sense has now been matched by anger and frustration from parents who fear the closure of Howden Park, touted by West Lothian Leisure, will mean the loss of a group which has been “a lifeline” for teens and children in West Lothian.

Meeting the staff and some of the teens involved you can see and hear the enthusiasm for the work that Firefly does, and for the space they occupy at the Howden Park Centre. It's a professional level theatre space, where teenagers and children learn performing and theatre related skills.

All are still trying to make sense of the decision.

“We were really disappointed that West Lothian Leisure hadn't contacted us, considering that we are residents,” Firefly's Artistic Director, Kirsty Byers told the Local Democracy Reporting Service.

Kirsty added: “At Howden we work with hundreds of children and young people and we weren't even given the heads up. It's something that was quite disappointing given the lives it

could affect.”

One of the keystones of Firefly is its ability to provide a safe space with others, where children and young people can learn a craft in professional way. Firefly offers workshops/opportunities for children and young people and with other third sector organisations.

“For us not to be consulted was difficult to grips with. We work with vulnerable, marginalised young people who have somewhere to go. What we do is try to provide stability. It’s a lifeline,” said Kirsty.

Darcy Weatherby, a member for seven years who, at 16, now works as a young leader taking classes of children said: “I’ve got friends who work at Xcite so I had heard earlier in the day. It was on a Wednesday which is usually the day that we come to Firefly. I am a young leader so I came early to do a workshop. Everyone was so stressed it was crazy, a scary day.”

Her mother, Rachel said: “As a parent we cannot thank people in Firefly enough. They have hugely impacted Darcy’s life.”

Another mother, Julie, said to staff members: “I cannot tell you how much of a difference this has made to my boy’s life. At one point I was really scared for him. He has just transformed. This is the only thing he has got and he just loves it. He has gained so much more confidence. I can’t thank you enough. It takes young people out of isolation. It is hugely inclusive.”

Rachel is angry at the way Howden Park has been mismanaged. She admitted that she’d never seen herself as a parent who would stand up in public and campaign but now, faced with the closure of such a valuable public space, she feels it vital to fight for its future.

The teenagers scoff at the Leisure trust’s claim the building is underused. One, Ameer Robertson, said there had been times she spent up to 100 hours in one month working with Firefly. She too is passionate about what the group means to her.

“As soon as you walk out of a two hour session you feel like you can do whatever you want. After doing this for the last

seven, eight years I feel I can do whatever because of the encouragement, positivity, optimism and quality that comes from this. It has just given me so much more confidence.”

Many in the group said that no matter much time they spent at Firefly they would probably spend more time using the centre as a space to meet friends and hang out.

A big complaint was that the café space is hardly ever open. Samantha said she often meets friends in the centre and would use the café, “but it’s only open two hours a day.”

On Friday afternoon there were families waiting to collect youngsters from classes, performance and theatre classes were going on in the three well-equipped studios and in the main auditorium little ones trod the stage in rehearsal.

In the bistro a group of a dozen adults were holding a meeting,

The only place that was quiet was the counter space at the café. If it had a shutter it would have been down.

Parents say constant under-investment has chipped away at a facility which is so busy. Rachel said: “The auditorium gives people inspiration and hope. When it was built it was such a luxury and a plus for Livingston and just to even contemplate this building being out of use is devastating.”

She suggested the building could be marketed as a wedding venue to boost income for the Trust. Howden Park is also a favourite of touring theatre companies because of its facilities.

For Firefly though, both the teenagers who attend and the staff who work with them, it is the intangible investment in lives that is the best evidence for keeping Howden Park open.

As society struggles back to its feet in the wake of the pandemic and the isolation of lockdown, the safe space, the place to connect especially for teenagers, is more important than ever.

Few would dispute that mental health care is in crisis, swamped by demand and fettered by funding restraint. Taking the axe to a building which offers that safe space, that emotional support to teenagers frustrates and bewilders those

who use the space and their parents who are so grateful for it.

Scan through Firefly's website and you can see the evidence yourself in testimony from parents and children. As one said: "Because of Firefly – I know my child will go through their teenage years, and will be alright!" and "I feel I know where I'm going now and I've got friends to go with me."

As Helen Rashad, the CEO put it: "We all understand the challenges of balancing budgets, but it is vital to consider the impact on the community and take the time to find a sustainable alternative. The work we do here changes lives, and that's an even more vital service at a time when the demand for mental health support for young people is greater than ever."

Another parent, Ellie Stewart, summed it up: "It always comes down to spreadsheets and accounts, but there's this added value thing that's always missing. That lives are changed especially at this time when we know that young people's mental health is an issue."

The argument about funding and investment is not just one about buildings, it is about people, especially the young people of West Lothian, the future of West Lothian. That is who Firefly is investing in.

Staff and the young people recognise that added value and know it is something that won't show on a balance sheet.

It's an investment which won't fill the pockets of a greedy few, but it will enrich us all with a common wealth. You cannot put a price on that.

by Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter

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Kirsty Byers, front left, the artistic director of Firefly, with some of the teens who regularly take part, and parents. Copyright Reach



Performers on stage in the Firefly arts studio. Copyright Firefly Arts.