

Howden Park Centre thrown a lifeline

The community theatre has been given short term financial aid by West Lothian Council, but closure still looms for pools

The council's Executive has agreed to provide £20,000 a month from September until the end of March 2024 to ensure the theatre remains open, and is able to honour existing bookings. The funding is intended to help ensure a smooth transition to an alternative potential operator.

The motion raised by Labour was supported by the opposition SNP – but the SNP's plea to extend ongoing financial aid to pools was rejected by Labour. It leaves the three pools threatened with closure by West Lothian Leisure just two days to hear if any community groups or swimming clubs can come up with plans by the deadline on 26th May.

The decisions were taken behind closed doors on Tuesday. At the start of the Executive meeting Council Leader Lawrence Fitzpatrick told councillors he had accepted a petition raised by the Hands off Howden Park Centre campaign group signed by 12,000 people calling for the theatre to be saved.

The opposition SNP group leader Cllr Janet Campbell tabled a motion that the debate be open to the public. It had been ruled as having to be held in private because it involved West Lothian Leisure as a third party.

Seconding that motion, depute group leader Robert De Bold called the Howden Park Centre the 'jewel in the crown' of the

cultural estate and said the proposals were unconscionable.

“Howden Park survived Thatcher, John Major, David Cameron but it is now touch and go whether it survives mismanagement by this Labour/ Conservative administration,” he said.

The public papers regarding the theatre and pools revealed that there were no feasible options to continue to operate the facilities with closure of all facilities looming in August unless alternative users or partners be found.

A spokesman for the council said all four facilities make a significant monthly financial loss and, if the facilities do not close, West Lothian Leisure faces the risk of insolvency, which would risk the closure of all their Xcite facilities.

He added: “The four facilities also require significant and immediate sums of capital funding to bring them up to standard. The council’s core capital grant has been reduced significantly by the Scottish Government.”

After the Executive meeting, Cllr Fitzpatrick said: “The council today agreed that one off funding of £20,000 per month from the start of September will be available until the end of March 2024 to support the operation of the centre for the remainder of the financial year.

“This is due to the unique nature of Howden Park in requiring a future programme of events, which had been arranged in advance of WLL’s announcement on 3 May that they seek to close Howden Park.

“This will ensure that a full programme of events is maintained and deliver a smooth transition to any potential operator approved following conclusion of the current process of exploring alternative options for running Howden Park Centre.

“The financial situation affecting local public services is at a critical stage and the insufficient levels of funding that we receive, combined with increasing costs, are simply not

sustainable. The levels of funding that we receive are simply not enough to enable us to protect all current services in the future.”

Addressing the long term future of Howden Park and the pools, Depute Council Leader, Kirsteen Sullivan, added: “No stone will be left unturned to look at alternative options. We are all extremely saddened and disappointed that WLL are in this position.”

Following the decision Firefly Arts, the theatre group resident at Howden Park said it was relieved.

Helen Rashad, the group’s CEO, told the Local Democracy Reporting Service : “We’re relieved that the council has listened to how important HPC is to West Lothian, set a more realistic time line and provided tangible support to secure our future.

“We’ll be working hard in partnership with everyone involved to make sure our home remains at the heart of the community in the future, and of course, are excited to keep moving on with all of the plans we have in place for the rest of the year”

The SNP proposed an addendum calling for “all interim measures necessary to ensure continued operation of the facilities at Broxburn Xcite, Livingston Xcite, Armadale Xcite and Howden Park Centre with a view to finding a viable and credible alternative by 31/12/2023.” This could be met from £6m which the SNP group identified was contained within the Inflation & Risk Reserves fund

After the meeting, Cllr Campbell told the LDRS: “We fully supported the Labour Motion but proposed an addendum. Cllr Fitzpatrick refused to accept the SNP addendum, combining both his motion with our requests – he claimed this was due to my addendum being “open ended”. It is not open ended and the funds have been identified.”

by Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter

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Protesters gather outside the Civic Centre in Livingston. Copyright Reach PLC. Picture by staff photographer Stuart Vance.