

Protestors gather to save Howden Park as councillors meet to discuss closures

Around 100 campaigners gathered outside the Civic Centre in Livingston calling for threatened West Lothian leisure facilities to be saved.

Money to save an under threat venue described as 'the beating heart' of the local community, and stop the proposed closure of three West Lothian leisure centres, should be provided by the Scottish Government, West Lothian Councillors have said.

The council's Executive met behind closed doors on Tuesday, after a protest was held by around 100 people outside the Civic Centre calling for the threatened Howden Park Centre, a theatre and arts venue in Livingston, to be saved alongside Xcite Livingston, Xcite Armadale and Broxburn pool.

The closures have been proposed by West Lothian Leisure (WLL) as it faces a budget deficit totalling £2.95 million – while a council report warned that if savings are not found the arms-length company could collapse, putting all of their venues at risk.

Councillors agreed to urge Scottish Ministers to step in and provide funding to save the venues.

The Executive has instructed the council's Chief Executive to write to Maree Todd MSP, Minister for Social Care, Mental Well-being and Sport to request funding be provided to support the retention of swimming pools and leisure venues in local

communities, such as West Lothian.

The council will also write to all West Lothian constituency MSPs and MPs to request that they write to the Minister to demand funding to enable the retention of local swimming pools and leisure facilities in West Lothian.

The Executive also agreed to engage with West Lothian Leisure to explore whether alternative options exist for the retention of facilities, including commercial and community options, and to bring back a report to the next meeting of the Executive on 23 May.

Depute Council Leader, Kirsteen Sullivan, who put forward a motion requesting additional funding, said: "No stone should be left unturned to look at alternative options and we require more information. We are all extremely saddened and disappointed that WLL are in this position.

"I believe it is worth exploring that, in the Spring budget earlier this year, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced funding of £63 million to support swimming pools remaining open in England. Around £70 million of Barnett Consequentials in total will go to the Scottish Government and, to date, no funding has been provided by the Scottish Government to specifically support swimming pools.

"In light of the recent request from West Lothian Leisure, and given the gravity of the situation, with the needs of the community and jobs at stake, we have asked the Chief Executive to write to the Cabinet Minister requesting funding support.

"Given the serious financial situation that West Lothian leisure are in, there is a need for West Lothian Council to respond to the request from the Board of West Lothian Leisure in the near future. Therefore, the Minister is requested to respond as a matter of urgency."

The SNP had called for a longer delay to study alternatives, and also questioned why the issue was being debated behind closed doors.

This was echoed by Independent Councillor Stuart Borrowman who pointed to the fact the debate was around public facilities and public money. He added that for West Lothian Leisure,

debating the issue in public would help them explain their case.

He also pointed out that the Armadale pool may have been the original property of the former Town Council and as such there could be issues in relation to the Common Good Fund.

Councillor Borrowman said: "There are complications. It seems that the situation remains bleak but if there are proposals and other options then now is the time for those to come forward."

Council leader Lawrence Fitzpatrick met with protesters before the meeting, assuring them that the council would do all it could to save the centre. Labour councillors had expressed surprise at the decisions taken to close the facilities.

The majority of the around 100 at the demonstration were there supporting the Howden Park Centre. They were joined by SNP councillors and Livingston MP Hannah Bardell.

A few protesters held up placards calling for Armadale pool to be saved, and one protester confessed to being disappointed that the protest hadn't been more widely representative of all venues threatened.

Kenny Craig who owns the Torphichen Inn, uses the facilities in Dedridge, Livingston. He said: "Like so many others I use the gym regularly. I've got a disabled bairn who has just recently been given a prescription by the doctor to use the gym to aid her ailments.

"For me it is a medical prescription that's being taken away and these things need to be looked at. You can't go closing down things there for people who can't afford things like gym memberships."

Before going into private session the Executive also heard an impassioned plea from the chair of Howden Community Council, Colin Williamson, for the retention of the centre.

He told the councillors: "The performing arts are important. It brightens up the lives of ordinary people without having to go to Edinburgh or Glasgow to do so. It is the beating heart of our community and I would urge you as a council to do all you could to try to find a way of ensuring that this stays

open and with us.”

After the meeting a council spokesperson said: “A report presented to the Council Executive today has confirmed that all four facilities currently 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.

“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.

Given the level of expenditure required, the funding to modernise and then operate the four facilities is not currently available. As such, the continued operation of the four facilities is unsustainable. The Leisure Trust aims to close the facilities by the end of August 2023.

The report discussed at today’s Council Executive was discussed in private because of the financial and commercial information contained in the report.

Similar to West Lothian Council, West Lothian Leisure faces significant increases in running costs, combined with reductions in funding. This has worsened because of the rising costs in energy and the vast amounts of energy required to keep swimming pools operational. West Lothian Leisure manage and run the facilities on behalf of West Lothian Council.

WLL face significant cost pressures in the current financial year and must make immediate and significant changes to their business model to address the existing deficit in their budget.

West Lothian Council has continued to provide the Leisure Trust with funding to enable it to trade with its current level of services. Given the scale of the financial pressures that the council faces, the council can no longer afford to continue to provide WLL with the same level of financial support.

Currently, WLL has a budget deficit of totalling £2.95 million from 2023/4 to 2027/28 and require to make savings of £1.185

million for this year alone. In February, WLL's Board approved a programme of mitigating actions to bridge their budget deficit.

West Lothian Leisure believe that by closing these four facilities, they will secure the future of their remaining facilities. If the consent is granted, West Lothian will continue to have 15 public swimming pools in operation, more than double the Scottish average compared to other local authority areas. West Lothian currently has two dedicated public owned Arts venues.

By Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter

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Protesters gather outside the Civic Centre in Livingston on Tuesday ahead of the Executive meeting.
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