

Campaign calls for council to continue licence for winter festival

A vigorous campaign has grown in Linlithgow calling for a local business to keep its licence to run a winter festival in Beecraigs Country Park.

The council's existing five-year commercial licence agreement with Rowen Events Limited for the annual winter-themed event at Beecraigs Country Park, Linlithgow (currently named Beecraigs Festive Forest) comes to an end on 31 December, after this year's programme.

Rowen Events will run this December's event, but as all councils have a legal requirement to obtain "best value" when selling or leasing land and property assets West Lothian has to go to the open market next year- inviting a new bid from Rowen, and potentially other operators.

But a robust local campaign in Linlithgow culminated in an amendment put before the a meeting of the council Executive calling for Rowen Events' lease to be extended until December 2024 to allow the operators to have a full five years.

The event was cancelled less than three weeks before it was due to start in December 2020 because of national Covid restrictions.

However, the council's Executive has approved

recommendations to openly advertise the commercial licence opportunity for the annual winter-themed event at Beecraigs at Linlithgow from winter 2024 onwards.

The annual event will not be a council event, rather it will be a commercial one delivered by the licensee by agreement on council-owned land.

Tabling the amendment, SNP Linlithgow Councillor Pauline Orr, backed by the town's Lib Dem councillor, Sally Pattle called for a deferral of decision and more detailed reports on the legal duties, and nuances, of the concept of best value.

Cllr Orr told the meeting: "For the local individuals who conceived and made a success of this event this is completely unreasonable and undeserved.

"My understanding is that Rowen Events made it clear to the council that they were willing to negotiate terms to enable it to continue."

Cllr Orr pointed to new community wealth building legislation which encourages local investment in communities. This focuses on local suppliers and the employment of local people.

She said: "Rowen Events employs 100 of its staff locally, 95 percent of the suppliers used by Rowen Events are from Livingston, Whitburn, Broxburn Bathgate and the Calder, Linlithgow and other constituency towns.

"In this cost of living crisis it is crucial for employment opportunities to stay with our communities. The event owned by Rowen Events generates an incalculable income for the constituency of West Lothian as a whole."

Cllr Pattle said a Facebook posting by the council about the re-tendering process has caused a lot of confusion and anger among the public, added: "That was very unfortunate timing."

She added that the council had approached Rowen Events in October to ask them for “commercially sensitive information outwith a formal tender process.”

Cllr Pattle ,who owns a bookstore in Linlithgow, added: “If someone walks into my bookshop, says they want to open another bookshop on the High Street in Linlithgow and would I hand over my last five years accounts, there is no way I would do that, and I think it shows a lack of understanding about how the private sector operates.”

However Labour’s Andrew McGuire said: “This seems to me to be a clear, run of the mill situation. The licence has expired and we are advertising with the expectation that anybody who wants to can bid on it. I don’t think there’s anything improper here.”

Linlithgow’s Labour councillor, Tom Conn said that in 2020 the council was in Level Four Covid restrictions, and that was why when the licence application went to the Licensing Committee a decision was taken on public health grounds.

He questioned the amendment’s assertion of intellectual property belonging to Rowen Events, citing other winter forest festivals elsewhere in Scotland.

Labour Leader Lawrence Fitzpatrick, chairing the meeting, said: “There’s nothing underhand here, no decisions have been taken today. A report will be brought back when the marketing exercise is complete.

“The event for this year is not affected in any way and the current operators will be able to submit a bid if they so wish.”

Interested parties will be required to identify and deliver environmental community-focused benefits as part of this agreement which may include local tree-planting or habitat enhancement projects.

Those interested parties will also be encouraged to use local suppliers and vendors in the delivery of their event and details of how they intend to achieve this will have to be provided in their offers.

The council will require the future licensee to pay a refundable deposit of £6,000 per annum to cover the potential cost of any damage caused to the country park as a result of the event taking place, and also cover any additional cleaning or utility costs. The five-week marketing exercise will begin in January 2024. It is hoped that a new agreement is in place by summer 2024 with the first winter event under the new licence taking place in December next year.

by Stuart Somerville Local Democracy Reporter