

Council rents offices while Waverley Court is mostly empty

It has been revealed that The City of Edinburgh Council spends more than £300,000 a year hiring offices while its £3million-a-year headquarters sits mostly empty.

In an answer to a Freedom of Information request it is disclosed that the authority has spent an “eye watering” £1.3million leasing office space since 2019.

Meanwhile Waverley Court, the local authority’s city centre HQ, is “like the Mary Celeste,” one councillor said while expressing concerns about the number of staff continuing to work from home.

A report published last year showed that more than 80 per cent of desks in the East Market Street base, which costs £3million a year to run, were not being used as at January 2023.

In response the council said it was legally tied into agreements for four office properties.

Council Finance Convener Cllr Mandy Watt said: “In the current financial year, we have exited one building and relocated the service into a council property. The remaining properties are Newkirkgate where a 20 year lease was entered into on 2005 and Lady Lawson Street which is held on an annual lease for a Health and Social Care use which has specific accommodation

requirements.”

Cllr Kevin Lang said: “At a time when the council’s own HQ is still sitting mostly empty, it flies in the face of common sense that such eye watering amounts of money are being spent hiring out office space. What’s even worse is that these costs appear to be going up rather than down.”

A freedom of information request by the Local Democracy Reporting Service revealed that £356,022 was spent by the council hiring offices in 2019/20, £326,491 in 2020/21, £339,281 in 2021/22 and £353,044 in 2022/23.

Cllr Lang, who leads the council’s Liberal Democrat group, added: “At this of all times, with Scottish Government cuts and threats to the funding of some key services, the council needs to be spending every penny wisely.

“The Labour administration needs to get a grip of this situation fast and make sure the council is not wasting money on office accommodation when it already has so much space available at Waverley Court.”

Cllr Iain Whyte said “getting out of unnecessary leases” would be a key focus of his Conservative group at the council’s annual budget setting meeting next month.

He said: “We will certainly be pushing as a group for the council to reduce its estate – and the easiest and quickest way of doing that is, where you can, getting out of unnecessary leases.”

He said part of the problem was “council officers spending all their time at home”.

He added: “I’m really beginning to get concerned about productivity loss and the accessibility for members of the public who need to contact people in our various departments.

“You go into Waverley Court, particularly on a Friday, and the

place is like the Mary Celeste. That can't continue. We have to have some kind of rules that get people in the office at least for part of the week otherwise they're not engaging with others in their team and with the public."

Cllr Lesley Macinnes, SNP finance and resources spokesperson said: "Given that Waverley Court now sits largely empty due to changes in the way people work post-Covid, the council must respond to ensure that public resources are being used to best possible effect. SNP councillors have been at the forefront of this, proposing that Waverley Court is let out so income is coming into the council, instead of it being left as an expensive white elephant.

"There are clearly questions to answer about whether some of these very long leases which are now expiring represent value for money. The Labour administration has to pull its finger out and make sure public money is being spent in the best way now so many council staff are working from home or hybrid."

Councillor Watt, Labour Finance and Resources Convener, said: "As part of our Corporate Property Strategy we're continuing to work towards a smaller, more efficient, affordable and accessible estate that contributes to the council's zero carbon goal. We need to make sure we get the balance right, delivering services to citizens across the city, supporting staff well-being and using our buildings efficiently and effectively."

Council chiefs are working to utilise more unused desks in Waverley Court and have rented space out to other public sector organisations including VisitScotland and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA).

Cllr Watt continued: "Arrangements like this are in line with The Scottish Government's Infrastructure Investment Plan which works towards an inclusive net zero emissions economy as well as bringing opportunities for greater collaboration with our

partners and generating welcome income.”

An additional £1.7million could be generated by leasing out around a quarter of the headquarters, a report to the Policy and Sustainability committee last August stated.

The plan forms part of a wider aim by the council to have a “smaller, more efficient, affordable and accessible estate” which it says will help achieve its net zero goals.

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter

