

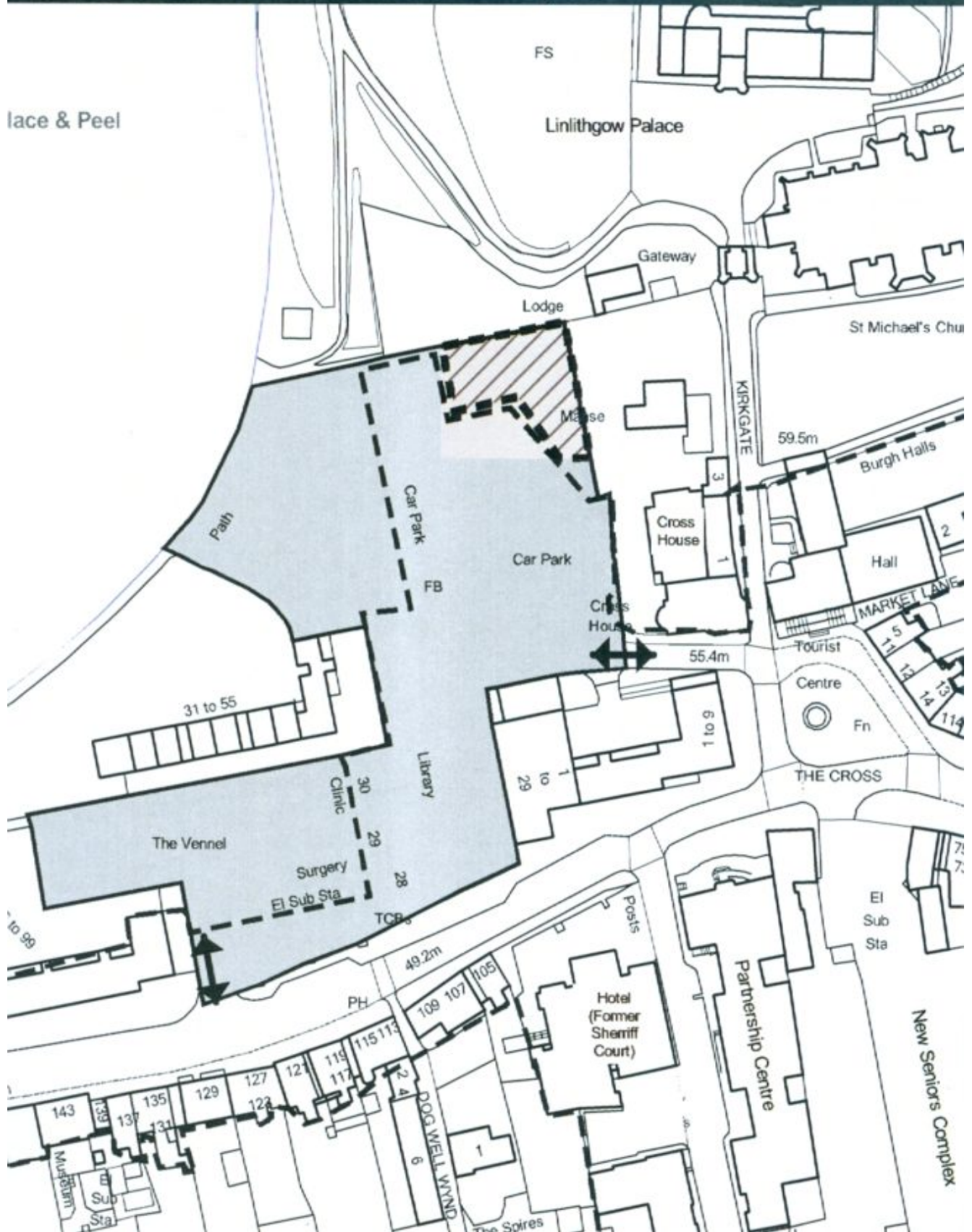
Plans for replacement of Brutalist development fronting Linlithgow Loch in doubt

Plans to replace the 1960s town centre development in Linlithgow with a new hotel shopping or arts centre may never happen because the costs could be prohibitive.

Plans for the future redevelopment of the award-winning 60 year-old mix of flats and retail space have been formulated for years largely by interested groups in Linlithgow. The Brutalist architecture has proved controversial over the years.

Blue sky plans in the past had suggested massive redevelopment of the site, with proposals including a hotel and new shopping facilities to an arts centre overlooking the loch.

SITE PLAN - THE VENNEL AREA, LINLITHGOW



Councillors on West Lothian's Executive heard this week that the cost of "transformative redevelopment" was unlikely however, given a valuation of the site owned by the council –

including a car park which nets the council around £100,000 a year.

Selling the car park would give away an income generating asset and lose control of the largest part of the site.

Local councillors came together at this week's meeting to agree on one thing – that they need to engage with the community.

David Baird, the council's Property Services Manager told the meeting: "In light of the valuation report received it is evident that the transformative redevelopment sought for The Vennel may not be achievable.

"In order to determine this is a formal marketing exercise will be undertaken and the results of this will be reported back to Council Executive following the summer recess."

A report to the committee concluded that "due to the specific constraints of the site, market conditions and the existing tenancies in place that if the plots were to be openly marketed the market value of each plot would be reflective of its existing use rather than any potential higher value attributed to re-development."

The council signed a lease with Horizon parking to manage the Vennel car park in 2019. That 10-year lease brings the council an annual rental income of £93,000 a year – plus 50% of the tariff income over £250,000.

Mr Baird's report detailed: "The car park is leased to a third party and generates a reliable fixed term annual income to the council, as such any redevelopment value of the car park would have to exceed the current value as a car park.

"The cost of clearing the site would be prohibitive to development, it is also recognised that developers are facing particular challenges around inflationary pressures on

building materials, labour market constraints and the cost of living crisis, which in turn diminishes any subsequent development value.”

While there was agreement to a test marketing of the car park and retail space the council owns in the Vennel councillors across the political divide called for more engagement with the community .

A redevelopment figure of £35 million had been quoted at the start of the exercise looking at regeneration in 2020. This earlier work had involved members of the community including the community council and other community groups.

The whole programme has been delayed by the Covid pandemic.

Labour veteran Tom Conn said: “We need to know what it is the community actually wants.”

He recalled an earlier discussion on redevelopment and pointed out: “I was approached by a council tenant who has a flat which overlooks the loch and he doesn’t want to move.”

He said there needed to be a jogging of collective memories on what had been said and planned in the past.

“We need to get an understanding of what actually the proponents are aiming for ; if it’s a refurbishment of flats or full demolition.”

Lib Dem Councillor Sally Pattle said: “Nothing has been communicated to the Vennel management group since March 2022, nearly two years ago, and because of that lack of communication, lack of direction, lack of leadership, nobody really understands what’s going on.

This is why we now find ourselves where you have community stakeholders going by what was in a report in 2021, believing that they are at heart of this redevelopment and then discovering that no, they’re not.

“I’m really pleased that there has been a commitment to re-engage with community stakeholders. I’m really glad to hear that this will also involve the three ward councillors because I think they want to be involved. We have to keep community stakeholders at the heart of this development process”

For the SNP, Councillor Pauline Orr said: “I would like to see three of us to put our party politics aside and actually support our town because we are so often left behind and our voices are not heard enough when it comes to decision making about things that are going on in Linlithgow.”

by Stuart Somerville Local Democracy Reporter