

New Fringe Hub puts adult learning classes 'at risk'

Edinburgh to lose its only dedicated adult learning centre as Fringe move approved

The future of Edinburgh's adult learning and education services is 'at risk', the council has been warned, as dozens of classes are set to be turfed out of the city's only dedicated centre, to make way for a new Fringe headquarters.

Councillors approved leasing the South Bridge Resource Centre to the Fringe Society despite having no comprehensive plan to relocate over 80 adult literacy, numeracy, language and other vital classes currently run from the old school, which will now need to leave by August.

The Centre currently accommodates over 1100 learners, in classes which include literacy and numeracy support, deaf learning, outlook for those accessing mental health provision, and ESOL. There are also a wide range of Adult Education classes including singing, pottery, art, languages and computer groups.

Council officials said all the classes would be moved into schools, community centres and other public buildings across the city and that a programme of engagement was underway to implement the moves.

However the Adult Learners Forum said engagement had not happened to any meaningful extent. They said "This is completely at odds with our experience of this process and we are baffled as to how council officers can have identified

locations which are “suitable “if they have not taken the time to find out what the learners need from those locations. Any engagement that has been undertaken has been instigated by the Adult Learners themselves. Any Council activity has been very last minute and tokenistic.”

Addressing a council meeting where the new lease was agreed on Thursday, March 14, the Adult Learners Forum pleaded with councillors to not force them out.

They said it would be “short-sighted to think any of the classes can be parachuted into any building”. They pointed out that the loss of a familiar city centre setting, easily accessible by public transport, would be “detrimental” to the lives and mental health of users, many of whom are already vulnerable, they warned.

The Fringe Society has been on the hunt for a new home for the world’s biggest arts festival for seven years and is expected to take over the South Bridge Resource Centre by autumn.

Some groups which use the space including Cannongate Youth and Totally Sound will continue to be based there following the refurbishment.

Fringe Society chief Shona McCarthy said without the £7m the organisation planned to invest in the centre it would be closed within 18 months “because the state of disrepair is increasing on a daily basis”.

She admitted it was “challenging” to hear of the impact setting up the new hub would have on adult classes and said: “If we could house everybody that’s in the existing building we would house everybody.”

City Centre councillor Finlay McFarlane said: “It was made clear that prior to entering into any formal agreement the existing adult education activity will need to be relocated to suitable alternative locations if remaining at South Bridge is not possible.

"It also stated that the council will prepare a strategy for the ongoing provision of the adult education service which currently uses the building.

"We have to get this right. It means too much to too many people and I just really compel everyone to think about how elected members can be kept updated."

Peter Watton, the council's head of corporate property, apologised to the committee and users of the building "for what has clearly been poor communication and poor engagement whether real or perceived".

He said: "It's not been intentional and it will be rectified forthwith.

"We know what's going to be lost and we don't know what's on the other side of that coin in terms of what replacement and facilities there will be.

"But I can say that over the last 25 years every similar project to this where somebody has been displaced has resulted in better outcomes."

A motion agreed by councillors stated it was regretful a decision to agree the new lease had been put before committee without a "comprehensive plan for the relocation of the services".

It said members were "having to make a decision without full understanding of the implications and impact on the learning community at South Bridge.

In a statement following the meeting, the Adult Learners Forum said:-

"We feel very strongly that our position as learners and regular users of the Centre has not been considered. It is on many bus routes, has suitable parking and is central. Council officers have very little idea of the nature and breadth of the learning that goes on in the building and consequently no

real idea what constitutes a “suitable” alternative provision.

It would seem that, yet again, CEC are more inclined to accommodate the needs of visitors to the city than those of Edinburgh people who they are employed and elected to serve.”

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter



One of the groups currently using the South Bridge Resource Centre