

# **Concerns that development at the heart of Linlithgow could be sold off to the highest bidder**

**Concerns have been raised that a controversial 1960s development at the heart of Linlithgow could be 'sold off to the highest bidder'.**

Developers are being offered the chance to potentially transform the Vennel area of Linlithgow.

But local councillors have called for assurances over which parts of the controversial Sixties development the council is looking to sell.

The council said that at this stage it was simply looking to "gauge interest" from developers in the site.

Lib Dem Sally Pattle asked officers at a meeting of the council's Executive: "What guarantee can you give to the community that these plots won't just be sold off to the highest bidder."

David Baird, the Properties and Estates Manager, said that there had always been a recognition that the council would have to seek the views of local people.

"Once we get proposals we will certainly go back to them."

He added "We'll not just consider the highest bid. Value itself is not the only criteria. That's why there is planning

criteria and a brief done to help potential developer looking at what can done. We will certainly look at all the proposals.”

Local community groups are keen that the council explores the possibility of transformative redevelopment in the area, after the opening of Linlithgow Partnership Centre (Tam Dalyell House) resulted in a number of properties becoming vacant.

Mr Baird, said there had been “useful” meetings with the community. “Future meetings will take place with the community after the marketing exercise has been completed, or beforehand if this is required.”

There was controversy earlier this year when a council report suggested that it would be prohibitively expensive to “meaningfully transform” the Vennel.

Built in the late 1960’s the Vennel development of a mixture of social and private housing and shop units was an architectural award winner in its day but has always been controversial.

Its design, internalising guttering and down pipes and with flat roofing, has caused problems from the outset.

West Lothian Council has committed to undertake a formal marketing of the area, to find out if there is commercial interest in the site. They are looking to market two plots including the car park and the single storey shops. The council owns a “street” of shop units which used to house the library and a doctors surgery. These units have long had problems with damp and water ingress.

There have since been fears voiced in Linlithgow that the council was considering “walking away” from the site by selling it for any kind redevelopment.

Campaigners argue the building has had its day and

comprehensive redevelopment will be the cheapest option in the long run.

Having actively promoted costed plans to redevelop part of the site local groups, including the town's Planning Forum, they say they were promised a seat at the table to discuss potential redevelopment of the Vennel but nothing went beyond that first promise and one meeting.

The marketing exercise will take place within the next few weeks and results be reported back to a future meeting of Council Executive likely after the summer recess.

Councillor Kirsteen Sullivan asked: "What engagement there has been with private residents in the area, I was surprised and alarmed to see the notes about compulsory purchase orders for flats given these are peoples homes. What conversations have been had?"

Mr Baird said the council has had no conversions with private residents because there are no residential properties in the plots being marketed. He added: " The comments on compulsory purchase were part of the wider conversations we had with community groups."

Councillor Pauline Orr for the SNP said: "I just want to thank David Baird and his team for capturing the feeling of lots of community in the report he has brought forward. It is very thorough indeed and looks at various concerns."

Councillor Pattle said: " I welcomed the renewed interest because for two years there was no communication, just no movement on the proposals that had been agreed in 2021. I also appreciate the recognition that the community is looking for transformative redevelopment in that area of Linlithgow.

"I'm fully aware of the impossible circumstances faced by this council and others because of years of cuts but I feel there is a real opportunity here with the vennel to create a place

and space that brings value to the community for a generation to come.

“In my opinion that is more important than a short-term financial gain.”

Labour’s Tom Conn said: “I welcome the report. I appreciate there’s been a vacuum because of Covid and the consequences of Covid but I’m delighted my motion submitted previously which included the old library being used by the development Trust would form an integral part of the redevelopment has been included in the marketing brief. “

A West Lothian Council spokesperson said later: “The marketing exercise will allow us to test the market and gauge any commercial interest in the site, which has been split into two plots.

“Any proposals received will be discussed with the local community groups involved, to make sure that their views can be incorporated into a report for the Council Executive after the marketing is completed.”

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter