

Management committees urged to take ownership of community centres

Towns and villages across West Lothian face losing vital community centres as budget cuts force the council to look to transfer ownership of buildings to user groups.

Management groups at all 38 of the county's community centres are being told they will have to consider taking over their buildings or taking on a lease.

One volunteer in Livingston told the Local Democracy Reporting Service that she was "having sleepless nights" at the proposals.

The transfer, which they volunteers fear would be hugely disruptive, would shave £1m from the council's increasingly stretched budgets.

West Lothian's Voluntary Sector Gateway has warned community groups, staffed by volunteers would face an "impossible task" of becoming owners of commercial operations.

Council officers met with management committees last month. The council proposes transfers or the introductions of leasing by the start of the next financial year, with decisions in place by the turn of the year.

Outlining the plans on the council's website Ralph Bell, the council's Customer & Community Service Manager said: "No final decision has been made on the future of these facilities, but given the severity of the financial position that all councils find themselves in, it is absolutely necessary to review and change how services are provided. We simply cannot afford to continue to deliver the same level of services."

He added: "Currently, individual management committees receive the income generated via community centres and village hall lets. West Lothian Council does not receive any income from lets, but does incur all of the costs for staffing, heating and electricity, maintenance and upkeep of the facilities.

"This financial model is no longer affordable, nor is it sustainable."

Mr Bell stressed: "Our key objective will be to work with management committees to help ensure that facilities remain open under new operating arrangements."

A spokesperson for the VSG said: "All community centres have been given three options:

- 1 – take ownership through Community Asset Transfer
- 2 – take a full repairing and insuring lease
- 3 – accept all charges being billed from the council

An increasing number of small, local community groups have raised concerns about the proposals to close and re-purpose community centres and partnership centres, particularly those that operate from within these centres.

The VSG spokesperson added: "They face the impossible task of taking on the running costs of operating these facilities with limited knowledge of how to do so and no money. Many groups have indicated they will simply be unable to take on these roles.

"A lot of the groups run multi-purpose events and host groups

that meet regularly, for example art groups, activity classes, Girl Guides etc. These groups are often the life-blood of communities and without anywhere to go, many individuals and groups will be left isolated and disconnected.

“It feels like responsibility is being forced onto inexperienced committees with very little time, limited support or information and no fallback position. Centres that do survive will need to become commercially viable. Community groups and charities will not be able to afford commercial market rents.

“Where centres do not survive, community groups and charities based in the centres will lose their base. Many of those charities, on which the Council relies to support those in need, will struggle to survive.”

Julie Henderson from the Mosswood Community Centre in Knightsbridge told the LDRS: “Over the last few years since the start of Covid, Mosswood community centres have stayed open throughout. Creating a warm space and opening the food shop two days a week. All of which couldn't be possible without volunteers.

“These volunteers are also the management committee who give their free time. The biggest decision we are asked to make is when are we having the pensioners Christmas lunch?

“Now we are being asked to take ownership of a building, which now has to make enough money to at least break even.

“The majority of groups in community centres are council groups. The let would no longer be free for these groups. If the centres close, where would the groups go? This would have a serious impact on the most disadvantaged groups of people.

“I'm having sleepless nights worrying about the staff who would lose their jobs. The groups that would stop and the kids that would miss out, if we couldn't come up with some

miraculous idea to raise £100k each year.”

In Addiewell the villagers rely on the community centre to provide a home to sports and youth clubs. Even the adjoining school uses the community centre for its sports.

Avril Finlayson from the centre management committee fears that charging higher rates would prompt clubs to look elsewhere to gather or would deter teenagers from coming to the youth club.

She pointed to the relatively low rates of youth disturbance and malicious fire raising in the village – suggesting an obvious link being the variety of clubs and sports available to teens.

Money raised through the clubs in the community centre is ploughed back into the community in paying for bus trips and other community treats for children.

The management committee at the Addiewell centre quickly realised that if they were to take it on as a commercial operation they would need a full time staff member to run the venue and to promote it for bookings. Just now individual groups manage their own use through the council’s ownership and booking systems.

That would be on top of paying commercialised bills for repair and maintenance and utilities.

Avril Finlayson also questioned reliance on volunteers giving their time to community centre activities. “You wouldn’t have the same numbers of people helping out if it was commercialised.”

Council officers will continue to meet with community groups and the proposals will come back to council committees for further debate before final decisions are made

The principal option from the council is Asset Transfer.

Rules on Asset Transfer where user groups assume ownership of the council assets have been modified, but in the years since Asset Transfer was first introduced only three council assets have been approved as having the financial wherewithal to be sustained by user groups.

Community Centres clearly act not only as council venues and bases, they are the lifeblood of all the communities they serve. In Knightsridge and Addiewell, and across the 36 other sites, the centres help to sustain the community. The big question in the next few months is whether there is enough money in the communities to help sustain the centres.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter