

Delay on closure plans for popular Bathgate stargazer's car park

Plans to close a West Lothian stargazer's car park at night have been slated by opponents who say that proper consultation has not been carried out.

Of the 83 neighbours within a mile of the Hilltop who were sent printed consultation forms- only 13 replied. And 12 of those agreed it should be closed at night.

Councillor Willie Boyle told a meeting in Bathgate: "It's a loaded questionnaire and a loaded demographic."

Bathgate Local Area Committee heard that council officers planned winter closure of the car park from 7pm to 7am and summer closure from 9pm to 7am.

Council officers cited complaints about fly-tipping littering and anti-social behaviour at the car park, which is popular with stargazers for its uninterrupted southerly views from the Bathgate Hills.

Countryside manager Andy Johnston said the council faced increasing costs in keeping the car park clean with cleansing crews having to visit three times a week. A £4,000 compacting bin had also been damaged by fire as had a picnic table and boundary fencing. Bottle banks at the site had also been overturned.

Councillor Boyle asked "Where's the evidence?" demanding to see backup reports from the police about damage and anti-social behaviour, and questioning whether Hilltop suffered from fly-tipping and littering any more than any other public area or lay-by in West Lothian.

"There's not enough evidence. We are being asked to comment but we have been given any details," he added. "It's unacceptable to have a report that as generalised as this. There are no stats."

Community Council representative Donald Stavert was equally unhappy that decisions would be made on the basis of the consultation. He accepted that the community council had been asked during the consultation but wanted assurances that the community council would be listened to.

He too said more evidence need to be shown to the community to justify the nightly closure.

Mr Johnston said it was standard practice to close car parks in rural areas at night to prevent anti-social behaviour and fly-tipping. He defended the consultation and highlighted the use of QR codes in the car park and the council's website inviting users of the car park, from wherever they came from, to respond.

He added: "I can't control the number of responses that come back from every consultation. The evidence will be presented to the Executive. This report is only to update the local area committee on the survey and consultation. The evidence is separate and will be provided to the council Executive as a part of a report going forward the report answers and provides information from the survey. "

Mr Johnston said no date for the report going to the Executive had been decided upon but accepted a suggestion from chair of the committee Harry Cartmill that the representations from the local area committee be included in that report.

The decision was made to defer taking the report to the Executive until November to enable the community council to formally respond.

By Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter