

SNP slate £180,000 spend as developer walks away from pool site

The leaders of West Lothian Council have been accused of spending needless cash on the demolition of a popular swimming pool.

A private developer was lined up to buy the former Bubbles pool in Livingston and turn it into a petrol station and food outlet.

Council officers wanted to demolish the site due to vandalism – and took the decision to flatten the former pool before a deal was signed.

Council officers acknowledged that West Coast Estates Ltd, the prospective buyers, had walked away from their £850,000 offer made in November after refusing to meet the council's demolition costs.

This week's meeting of the Executive heard the demolition cost the council £180,000.

Senior SNP councillor Pauline Stafford told a meeting of the Executive that the decisions taken in June had left the Labour-run council "out of pocket and the town without a valued asset."

But council officers defended their decision to demolish the site before a deal was sealed as one taken in the interest of public safety after break-ins and fires at the site and also

at the closed Broxburn pool.

The site was destined to be redeveloped as a filling station and food outlet by West Coast Estates Ltd. No plans were submitted.

The decision on disposal had been delegated by the Executive in November last year.

The report said: "The council has arranged and paid for works to demolish the former swimming pool building and the site has now been cleared. Despite prolonged negotiations, WCEL have.. recently advised officers that they are no longer willing to meet the aforementioned demolition costs and they are now only prepared to pay the original £850,000 purchase price for the now cleared site."

The report submitted to this week's meeting of the Executive recommended returning the site on the open market to secure the best price available.

Officers confirmed in response to questions from Labour councillors that it was likely that the demolition costs would likely be recovered in the sale of the cleared site.

However Councillor Stafford told the meeting that there had been a lack of transparency about the way the closure of the pools, including Bubbles, had been handled. That lack of transparency continued with the decision to demolish the building without bringing the matter back to councillors.

She said: "It's more about the processes. This goes back to transparency. The decision was taken to demolish without reference to the members. What's ultimately failed here is that we are out of pocket in the public purse and community short of a valued asset that was very important for our leisure and wellbeing."

Scott Hughes, the council's strategic property asset manager,

told the meeting that he had taken the decision to press ahead with demolition on the night he attended the blaze at the closed pool in Broxburn after after the initial blaze in Livingston.

Fire and police officers had also raised their concerns about the vacant buildings being targeted.

Mr Hughes said: "I was there when the Broxburn pool went up on a Saturday night. I remember being there in person and not knowing if there was anybody trapped in that building.

"At that point we had been negotiating with West Coast, trying to get missives concluded so we could push the button and get the demolition contract awarded."

Labour's Craig Meek said: "I am disappointed to hear that the developer pulled out, but we know these things happen. I think if somebody had been critically injured on that site we would have been sitting asking officers: 'why did you not do something under delegated powers?'

"Whilst we are not where we'd want to be we can still go back out to tender and hopefully get a better price."

By Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter