

Campaign to stop closure of museum dedicated to Edinburgh's working class history gathers pace

The closure of a museum dedicated to Edinburgh's working class history has been described as "the final cut for the Old Town" as a campaign to keep it open gathers pace.

Council officials have proposed closing the People's Story for seven months due to an "urgent" need to cut costs, amid a projected £26.7m overspend by the authority this year.

However it's emerged the Royal Mile attraction is already shut to the public "due to staffing pressures and a need to manage expenditure," despite the controversial move not being approved by councillors.

Local resident Jim Slaven, coordinator of Edinburgh Detours, a not-for-profit organisation which organises guided tours about the city's social history, told the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) he was shocked to find it had already closed and said: "It's a disgrace to find it's going to be closed for several months at least, without any consultation.

"We try and commemorate that immigrant working class history. The stuff in the museum is a vital part of that."

Mr Slaven said he's heard from "artists, writers, trade unionists, local residents and historians" in the last 24 hours since the plan emerged.

"People are really outraged," he added, "this is the final cut for the Old Town, all the social spaces and community centres in the Old Town are gone.

"They've turned the city centre into a citadel for the rich and now they're trying to write us out of the history of the city as well."

Upon visiting the Canongate on Thursday, September 26, the LDRS witnessed a number of people attempting to access the museum but finding it had been shut.

Closure of the People's Story until April and reduced opening hours of the Queensferry Museum could save around £205,000, officials estimated. However this is less than one per cent of the forecasted in-year budget deficit.

The council said "urgent action" was necessary to "reduce frontline service expenditure" before the end of the financial year in March.

Val Walker, convener of the culture and communities committee, which will debate the proposal next week, said the council's support for the city's cultural venues "continues to be fantastic".

She said: "It's important to us that we keep our venues as accessible as possible for residents and visitors.

"The People's Story Museum is currently closed due to staffing pressures and a need to manage expenditure. The report . . . proposes a temporary closure while these issues are addressed.

"The proposals are intended to reflect public demand across our museum and gallery venues and keep the most visited venues open seven days a week.

“The proposed seasonal operation model for People’s Story is to close during the autumn and winter months, reopening in April 2025, in which time a more consistent operating model can be implemented.”

But one of the convener’s Labour Group colleagues said the idea was left furious at the idea.

Councillor Katrina Faccenda said: “It is absolutely astounding that in one of the world’s premier tourist cities we are closing municipal museums and it underlines the failure of our tourism policy to drive income back towards local services.

“The People’s Story was opened in 1984 by Edinburgh’s first Labour administration to create a collection which reflected the working class history of Edinburgh and our proud story of protest and organising for the rights of people at home and around the world, its location in the Canongate is an important reminder that Edinburgh’s Old Town until a few decades ago was home to thousands of working people, often living in poor housing conditions, but their story and their community is equally important to those remembered in our castles and palaces.”

While Mr Slaven asked: “Who is the city for?”

“Edinburgh is one of the wealthiest cities and one of the wealthiest states on the planet. This is a vital piece of the city’s history, the social, industrial – the history of communities and they’ve just closed the doors on it.”

He added: “We recognise there are financial pressures on the council, we could have discussion about why that is and what the solutions might be but I think this should be seen as an opportunity.

“We need to look at the People’s Story which has been disinvested in, we need to get stakeholders round the table and to open the People’s Story better than it was before.”

The city's museums and galleries account for £467,000 of the estimated overspend, having spent more on employee costs and generated less income than was expected in 2024-25.

A report said the service has struggled to make money in recent years due to reduced income from the Scott Monument, where visitor access has been scaled-back due to suicide attempts, and the Nelson Monument, which has only just re-opened for the first time since the pandemic.

As a result of a recruitment freeze by the service there have been "instances of reactive museum closures as staffing levels have dipped below the minimum required to maintain a full service," the report added. "This has been exacerbated by sickness absence and annual leave.

"To contain the budget deficit by March 2025, officers are recommending that changes are made to the opening hours of two Museums: People's Story and Queensferry Museum."

Officials have assessed alternative options, including keeping all attractions open but only opening five days a week, reduced from six. However they say as staff are contracted according to the council's terms and conditions and work to fixed rotas and contracted days these changes "would take approximately four months to enact".

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter