

January deadline looms for community centres

A bid by West Lothian council to have community centre volunteers take over ownership of buildings is leaving workers 'exhausted' and putting people off using the spaces, it has been claimed.

Management committees of community centres have been asked to consider taking on ownership of buildings to save £1m. Other options include taking a full repairing and insuring lease or accepting all charges being billed from the council.

The council says the current model where it pays for the buildings but the management committee keeps any profits made is unsustainable.

But one community centre worker said this week she "was exhausted" by the process and said the plans were actually damaging centres already by deterring groups from committing to make bookings.

An SNP demand for a delay to the January deadline for the potential transfer of community centres to volunteers was narrowly defeated in the council chambers this week.

Pauline Stafford, the SNP group deputy leader branded the plan as "a hard-nosed fire sale."

Councillor Stafford said: "I think our communities are being gas-lit by this approach."

She said local people had “witnessed what looked like a hard-nosed fire sale of some of the county’s most valued community assets.

“Assets which this council was entrusted to be the custodian of, not the owner of. We’ve got 36 of our most valued community centres now under threat.”

Outside the council chambers there’s general concession that, politically, the council’s plans could have been better handled.

There’s also the belief that those most affected could have had earlier notice of what the council’s options were.

Staffers also feel they could have been engaged at an earlier point to identify other potential ways of cutting costs.

While some community centres may be “ready to roll” with becoming independent of the council many more, and especially the smaller village halls, are not.

SNP leader Janet Campbell said plans “were being rushed through” and added: “Our communities feel torn apart by the actions of this administration and this is unforgivable.”

Her motion said: “Community Asset Transfer is designed to address local priorities and needs; increase active inclusion; build on the assets of local communities to reduce poverty and to enable inclusive growth.

“The time-scale set out by the council does not enable any of this to happen and is actually contrary to the spirit of Community Empowerment.”

The motion called on the council to extend the time-scale for local organisations to make any decision, and to provide support for the communities and carry out consultation with a view to forming a group of stakeholders and to report back to the council on the advice and information provided to these

community groups and the support which has been offered to enable asset transfer.

One community centre staffer told the Local Democracy Reporting Service: "Do you know the council is putting on workshops on how to run community centres. You couldn't make this up. If it is that easy, why are they not running the community centres to a profit?"

"It is all just a box ticking exercise by the council, so they can say they have done everything they can to make this madness work and it is the management committees who aren't stepping up to take over the running of the centres. We will get the blame if the centre shuts down.

"Why can't they put all this planning and organising into running the community centres, efficiently, professionally and profitably to benefit each community?"

"At the moment because of all the uncertainty the community centres are having difficulties in getting long term lets and clubs setting up. So even if we agree to take over the community centre, we are starting from zero, not with a thriving going concern.

"I am exhausted with it all. I feel the whole situation has been drawn out. If a management committee needs more time, they should be able to get it. For the rest of the committees, it should stay the same timeline."

At the council meeting independent councillor Andrew McGuire responded to the SNP motion by saying: "What's on the table is nothing more than consultation."

And raising an amendment Labour group and council leader Lawrence Fitzpatrick said: "No community will be left without a proper meeting place, and we have given that assurance and on this basis. I would point you to the success of the community asset transfer at Low Port Centre.

“The whole rationale of this process is to keep community centres open and not to close them, but to look at better ways they can be run and managed.”

The SNP group had earlier pointed to how few – only three-Community Asset Transfers had taken place in the county since the Community Empowerment Act legislation was first introduced in 2015.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter