

Nine West Lothian council nurseries could close by the end of June next year

Nine council nurseries could close by the end of June next year, it has been warned, because of falling rolls and fewer children in West Lothian.

Councillors heard that fewer parents are choosing council venues as more private nurseries have opened.

The council's Education Executive has agreed to start a public consultation on the future of nine nurseries across the county before a final decision is made in March.

The SNP said the minority Labour-led administration had ignored the drift away from council venues and fuelled the "unrest" among parents, children and nursery staff.

Answering a questions from executive chair Councillor Andrew McGuire, Greg Welsh, Head of Education (Primary, Early Years and Resources) told councillors: " In 2019 250 children were placed in partner provider [private] settings.

"We have seen an incremental increase year on year and, as of August 2024, there are now 833 children placed in partner provider settings through parental choice, so the council's share of parental voice has dropped from above 90% down to 79% of parents and carers choosing council settings."

The number of private providers has risen from 12 in 2019 to

32 this year.

Councillor McGuire asked: "If we were to experience a baby boom would these decisions be able to be overturned and could we add in capacity. In the short term what will happen to the buildings."

Mr Welsh said that if there was a decision to close in any of these settings those with schools would be handed over as additional space to the school to use. Standalone settings could be declared surplus to requirement.

= He added: "Although there are no roll projections per se because nurseries don't have catchment areas unlike primary schools, what we have taken cognisance of is the approved ten-year school roll forecasts and counted them back. Re-establishment of early clearing provision is something that can be undertaken."

The meeting heard that the placement process for early learning and childcare is "highly complex with a variety of options in term times and the number of days."

Responding to questions from a number of councillors as to why the proposals had not gone to earlier scrutiny by councillors Mr Welsh explained that it was a question of delivering adequate consultation periods for parents and carers before decisions have to be made next Spring ahead of the proposed August 2025 term.

Councillor Moira McKee Shemilt, who raised the amendment said the timing "does smack of ill-planning and last minute."

A report to the Executive said: "The anticipated revenue savings will deliver the agreed £1.34 million revenue saving, from a reduction in Early Learning and Childcare staff (ELC practitioners, pupil support workers, ELC Area Managers and management time allocated in school budgets).

“In addition, for the three standalone nursery schools, property costs such as repairs, maintenance, compliance testing, utility costs, FM and cleaning costs. The total number of children accessing Early Learning and Childcare in the third term of session 2023/4, when eligibility is at its highest, was 4265. The current oversupply of places was therefore 2017.”

The report added: “It is therefore possible to reduce physical capacity, whilst still retaining confidence that every child in West Lothian will be able to access 1140 hours at an establishment a reasonable distance from their home, and still maintaining an appropriate level of flexibility and choice and models of provision.”

An amendment raised by the SNP did not reject the consultation processes for any of the nine nurseries but sought more flexibility “ to ensure that all voice are heard and considered.”

The amendment added: “Forewarning of a drift from council to private provision was communicated by parents and carers through earlier consultation. The council did not heed these warnings and this neglect has led to current unrest and upset.”

The council motion to start the consultation was passed by nine votes to five. There were four abstentions.

The proposal is to commence statutory consultation on the closure of ELC provision at Bathgate West Nursery School; Deans North Nursery Class; Fauldhouse Nursery Class, Glenvue Nursery School; Ladywell Nursery School; Linlithgow Bridge Nursery Class; Our Lady’s Nursery Class, Stoneyburn; St Anthony’s Nursery class, Armadale; and St Joseph’s Nursery Class, Whitburn.

That consultation will get under way next week- with public meetings at all of the nurseries taking place in the weeks

starting 23 and 30 September. The formal consultation ends in November- with a presentation of proposals to Education Scotland.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter