

Voluntary sector in West Lothian work with community centres

West Lothian's Voluntary Sector Gateway has vowed to work with council to find solutions for the 38 community centres and village halls potentially facing closure.

Alan McCloskey, the CEO of the Gateway, which speaks for the voluntary sector in the county, told councillors that a meeting would take place this week with the Joint Forum of Community Councils to look at a way ahead for the centres.

While it is acknowledged that there may be some centres which are capable of striking out on their own with full time management committees taking control of centres through the Community Asset Transfer process, there are many more facing uncertainty.

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

Mr McCloskey told a meeting of the Economy, Community Empowerment and wealth Building PDSP that earlier sight of the proposals before June would have been useful in terms of looking at alternatives.

He added that after meeting with the Joint Forum: "we want to have constructive dialogue with the council on what the options would be. We want to come back to the council with some alternative options."

In his report to the PDSP the CEO said: "There is growing community concern about the implications of the council's Community Centre and Partnership Centre review. Many of the centres are run by Management Committees run by volunteers and they are the lifeblood of community and social cohesion. There is real concern that these centres will close in the coming months.

"They face the impossible task of taking on the running costs of operating these facilities with limited knowledge of how to do so and no money. Many groups have indicated they will simply be unable to take on these roles.

"A lot of the groups run multi-purpose events and host groups that meet regularly, for example art groups, activity classes, Girl Guides etc.

"These groups are often the life-blood of communities and without anywhere to go, many individuals and groups will be left isolated and disconnected.

"There is no central management committee structure, so VSGWL has met with reps from the Joint Forum of Community Council to discuss running a publicity campaign to explore other options."

When committees first had sight of the proposals in June anxiety was quickly stoked.

Speaking to the Local Democracy Reporting Service in July, Avril Finlayson from the management committee of Addiewell community centre echoed concerns voiced across the county that volunteers would not be in a position to take on full time running of centres as commercial operations. And many

communities could not afford the other options proposed by the council.

At this month's PDSP Councillor Andrew Miller said the proposals would seem to be attractive to one or two centres but not the majority and he asked: "Does the council have other options to achieve projected savings?".

Chairing the meeting Councillor Kirsteen Sullivan (pictured) said: "To be honest that may be beyond the remit of this PDSP. I don't think we'd have appropriate officers here to discuss it."

Head of Economic development Craig McCorriston told the meeting: "It's not a matter that would be under consideration for this PDSP. it would be considered elsewhere within the council at another PDSP and by the Executive."

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter