

Gorgie Farm's future uncertain after charity 'hands back keys'

Concerns have been raised after the charity bought in to revitalise Gorgie Farm "unexpectedly" handed the keys back to Edinburgh Council.

Edinburgh Voluntary Organisations Council (EVOC) was given £150k to develop a plan for the farm's future. The organisation had been working on the city site, which remains closed to the public, since March 2023.

Unveiled this summer, the blueprint for 'Gorgie Community Farm' included spaces for growing, outdoor play, community enterprises and markets. However it said returning any animals – previously the most popular element of the free attraction – would not be possible for several years due to costs.

The council has invited groups interested in running Gorgie Farm long-term to come forward and has received five expressions of interest.



However councillors said they were concerned after EVOC “unexpectedly handed back the lease of Gorgie Farm to the council,” an emergency motion tabled by the Greens this week stated.

One said it was “not part of the plan” for the farm to be left unoccupied until a new operator was brought in and feared the decision to “essentially mothball the site” could see its condition deteriorate further.

Another added as a result of the move community groups helping to maintain the garden area had now been “asked to leave due to safety concerns”.

A recent briefing note to councillors said EVOC had “discharged their responsibilities and completed the site option analysis.

“For safety reasons, the site will remain closed to the public

and volunteers until a new tenant is secured and the future direction of the farm is agreed.”

EVOC was contacted for comment.

Culture and communities convener Val Walker said: “It’s my priority is to have the farm back open for residents, visitors and volunteers as soon as possible.”

The urban farm off Gorgie Road has now been shut for over 18 months since previous operators, Love Learning, shut the gates and handed the keys back to the council amid financial difficulties.

EVOC said structural damage to buildings, flooding and frozen pipes were among the issues it discovered upon moving in last year, which meant the farm couldn’t re-open yet and required significant investment.

It is understood a new tenant “will not be in place until April 2025 at the earliest,” the Greens’ motion passed at the culture and communities committee on Thursday, October 3 said.

Complete closure of the site with no supervision for six months could “lead to further deterioration,” it added, “and create additional barriers for the new tenant”.

It also agreed the council “will take the necessary steps to make site safe at the earliest opportunity, so that volunteers are able to return to the garden area”.

Sighthill/Gorgie councillor Dan Heap, who tabled the proposal, commented: “It is almost two years since the farm closed to the public, and just as we are making progress towards getting a new operator for the farm, it is unacceptable the farm has to be closed down even further, with community groups now asked to leave due to safety concerns.

“That is why I am delighted to have got unanimous support for my proposals for the council to address any safety issues

stopping community groups looking after the site.

"I look forward to these groups returning as soon as possible, and the new operator opening to the public what can safely be reopened, soon after it takes over in April."

Independent ward councillor Ross McKenzie said: "This is presented as if it was part of the plan, but I think it's important to be clear this is not the case, and that during the discussion at committee in August, there was no suggestion that EVOC was in any hurry to hand back the lease.

"The Interim chief executive of EVOC made it very clear that intended to keep the lease, continue with activities on the site and work on a 'transition plan' for the new tenant.

"We've suddenly gone from a position where we recognised that the site needed a bit of attention, a bit of a presence to stop it from falling into a state and to support volunteers to do a bit of gardening, to one where the council is essentially going to mothball the site until a new tenant comes in."

Councillor Walker said: "Gorgie City Farm has been an integral part of the local community for decades and it's heartbreaking to see it lying empty.

"That's why it's my priority is to have the farm back open for residents, visitors and volunteers as soon as possible.

"I've been really encouraged by the response we've had to our call for expressions of interest and can't wait to see the proposals come forward in more detail.

"Hopefully, we can now look forward to an exciting new chapter in the history of our much-loved community farm."

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter