

Museum faces prolonged closure despite uproar over budget cuts

The doors of a much-loved Edinburgh social history museum are set to remain shut, despite councillors not giving their backing to a controversial plan to keep it closed until April to save cash.

Officials proposed temporary closure of the People's Story on the Royal Mile until April amid a projected £26m overspend by the council this year.

However the city's working class history museum has already been closed for two months, it emerged, due to staffing shortages and a freeze on any new staff in a bid to ease budget pressures.

A growing number of residents, academics, artists and trade unionists have hit out at the proposal since it was published last month. It also includes moving the Queensferry Museum to an appointment-based service. But together these would only save an estimated £260k – around one per cent of the in-year deficit.







At a tense council meeting where the issue was debated on Thursday, October 3, campaigners stressed the importance of keeping the People's Story open.

Culture and communities convener Val Walker did not accept a recommendation to keep it closed through autumn and winter.

However alternative proposals for re-opening, which could include reduced hours across the service and charging for visitors, are not set to be considered until December. That is unless councillors agree to take urgent action at a full council meeting next month, which the report was referred to.

"The administration wants the People's Story to re-open," Cllr Walker said, "but we recognise that there are challenges, hurdles to overcome. We cannot just re-open it tomorrow. There are not the staff to have every museum open.

"That is an absolute commitment from me that at the December committee meeting we will be looking at the ways in which we can re-open that museum – not in April but in December."

Speaking on behalf of the Save the People's Story campaign, Jim Slaven said the free museum was a "vital part of this city's social fabric".

Over 100 academics from the University of Edinburgh, a range of trade unions and "residents in every community across the city" has now backed the campaign, he said.

"I did not find one person who thought closing that museum was a good idea. Because that museum telling the working class history of this city, the stories of workers and communities – that is a vital part of people in these areas feeling like they belong to the city, like this is their home city.

"To close it would be an act of social vandalism."

Mr Slaven, an Old Town resident, accused the council of "mismanaging" the attraction "for years" and said a "root and

branch review" of how it is managed was needed, adding: "It needs love and investment".

In response to suggestions the collection could be moved elsewhere, he added it was vital the People's Story remained as a "standalone museum".

He said: "For working class people in this city, life is pretty difficult.

"People are pushed to the margins in every sense and the symbolism of having a working class history museum telling their story right in the centre of town is absolutely crucial, and to close it will be the final nail in the coffin."

The council's head of museums and galleries Karl Chapman admitted the interim closure "seems harsh," but said he wanted to "buy ourselves some time" to draw up alternative proposals.

"As officers it's our responsibility to mitigate [the overspend]," he said. "On staffing at the moment, we just don't have the numbers."

He told councillors the People's Story and Queensferry were selected for spot closures in response to staff shortages as they generated the least income and footfall. "We're not going to shut our museums that have greater footfall and greater income," Mr Chapman said.

Options to boost income in the service include charging tourists for entry while keeping access free for residents which he said would be "utterly transformative".

He added: "We're getting digital wifi donation points installed in the key museums, that can raise a lot of money but you have to do it really well. It's not enough for us to just put the machine up.

"I know the interim and short-term closure seems harsh but we wanted to buy ourselves some time to be able to work through

that and come back to the December committee with alternative options.”

Interim director of place Gareth Barwell said there was “no silver bullet” which would re-open museum tomorrow.

Councillor Walker said: “The situation that we were faced with was that officers were having to react in an unplanned way to not having enough staff to safely open every museum, so closures were happening in an unplanned way.”

Opposition to the plans united an unusual coalition of the Conservatives and the Communists.

Conservative city centre councillor Jo Mowat told the committee: “This is a really important place that binds the community of Edinburgh back to its roots.

“The fact this museum tells a story is in the name of that museum. This was created with a narrative at it’s heart, so it’s important we don’t split this all off.

“It is an important part of a story that quite often cities don’t tell.

“I’m proud we tell that story and we should continue to do so.”

Speaking to the LDRS at a protest before the meeting, Peter Olech from the Communist Party of Britain, called it a “small minded petty decision”.

He said the decision to close the museum should be reversed “with immediate effect” and this should be followed by a review of the governance and management of “this important working class resource”.

He added: “We want to see a living, thriving and museum of Edinburgh’s working class history, and one that involves local community groups, resident groups, trade

unions, academics – all the people who have turned up here today to protest.”

Former councillor and MP George Kerevan, who was part of the city’s first Labour administration which agreed to establish the People’s Story, said: “We put in in the manifesto for the 1984 local election, we won the election . . . this was voted in by the people of Edinburgh – it’s not something somebody made up, the people wanted it, we need to keep it.

“One of the things about this museum is it says there are real people and they’ve made a living here, they’ve raised families here, immigrant communities have lived here. We need to tell their story. One you lose you memory, you lose who you are, you lose your ability to change.

Mr Kerevan added: “I’m incandescently angry because it’s a trivial amount of money they are trying to save.

“It’s a huge budget the council has, to take £200k out of it, it’s not really about that, it’s about expunging the history of Edinburgh.”

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter