

The future of The People's Story still under discussion

The People's Story museum has been temporarily closed due to "staffing pressures", but the council will continue the discussion at a meeting of the full council next Thursday.

The council's decision to close the venue was set against a backdrop of budget pressures in the Museums and Galleries service, and a forecast that the move would reduce the department overspend by anything up to £200,000. The council had approved a recruitment freeze at the beginning of this financial year. The organisation employs 35 full time equivalent Visitor and Monument Assistants, but five are absent due to long term sickness. The initial proposal had been to close the museum until Spring 2025, but the Labour administration restricted the temporary closure until a new report could be written by officers for the December 2024 meeting.

The committee also asked officers to try and display parts of the museum collection at the Museum of Edinburgh and local libraries on a temporary basis. Elected members also asked for a financial report to be considered by the Finance and Resources committee in November.

Cllr Finlay McFarlane asked for the matter [to be brought before the whole council in November](#) for further discussion. He said: "The SNP Group are clear that the Labour-led

administration must re-open and secure the future of The People's Story in its current premises as a priority. It is utterly unacceptable that Edinburgh's only working-class history museum and all the stories it contains remains closed while civic Edinburgh toasts its 900th year celebrations.

"Labour should be moving heaven and earth to find a solution that re-opens the doors, rebuilds the damaged relationships with working class communities in the city and explores the great many offers of support and ideas for renewal. We also expect Labour to be crystal clear that under their administration The People's Story will remain in the Canongate Tolbooth as a city centre standalone museum for the public good."

Culture and Communities Convener, Cllr Val Walker said after taking the meeting: "We are totally committed to re-opening The People's Story museum, but we recognise that there are challenges to overcome.

"We have listened to and read the statements from our passionate community, and part of our role as councillors means that we sometimes need to make hard decisions.

"No one wants to see the People's Story museum closed, but 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.

"This temporary closure of the People's Story has been put in place and it 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."

The council has identified that it has an overspend of £26.741 million in this financial year and the Museums and Galleries

service is forecasting an overspend of £0.467 million. This figure is made up of employee costs and a shortfall on projected income of around £0.140 million (primarily from income at the Scott and Nelson monuments – but the latter has been closed until recently).

Commercial concerns

Conservative councillor, Phil Doggart, is not convinced that council officers will recommend taking a commercial stance on the matter – which he thinks is essential. He explained to The Edinburgh Reporter that he does not have the same allegiance to any one museum building such as The People's Story. Instead, he would like a report from officers in December which examines a sustainable route forward for all the buildings which the council owns and which are used by Museums and Galleries Edinburgh.

Cllr Doggart said: "I think the idea that there would be the same number of city museums kept open is fantasy land. We need to consolidate the number of buildings that we've got, and a lot of them are in a very small area. There is absolutely no reason that we can't make better use of the space that we've got, that we drive some commercial activity that would certainly help finance the museums. And I'm just not talking about The People's Story, I'm talking about all of them. We need to actually recognise how we can get more money out of the facilities.

"And I know there are some restrictions, but there are things that we should be looking at. I think officers should be coming up with a range of ideas that would allow the council to maintain the same number of exhibits, albeit possibly reconfigured in a different way.

"But there's absolutely no reason, with a little bit of ingenuity, looking at examples of museums globally, as to how they have managed to survive and a lot of cases flourish, that

we should be looking to do that. So I'm keen to see what officers come up with and be imaginative and I will be having conversations with council officers to look at the options.

"Hard decisions need to be taken. There's too much sentiment attached to bricks and mortar, but not enough sentiment attached to the service has been provided. And now we are heading towards the budget. Ever since I was elected in 2017 all I have heard is "estate rationalisation". Estate rationalisation has to be done. We can't afford the current buildings, we don't need the current buildings, but nothing is ever done."

CULTURE MINISTER "SADDENED" BY CLOSURE

Lothian MSP, Miles Briggs, asked the Culture Minister and MSP for Central Edinburgh, Angus Robertson, what discussions minister have had with the council about the closure during ministerial questions at Holyrood.

Mr Robertson said: "I am saddened to hear about the temporary closure of the People's Story museum, which tells the important history of the lives of ordinary working people in Edinburgh, and I hope that it reopens as a priority.

"I also recognise the challenges that Scotland's museums face, which is why we are continuing to support the sector with £2.7 million of funds in 2024-25 to Museums Galleries Scotland, Scotland's national museums and galleries development body. I urge the City of Edinburgh Council to continue discussions with key stakeholders, including Museums Galleries Scotland, to see whether there is a way forward."

On being pressed to visit the museum when it reopens, Mr Robertson said: "It has caused absolute consternation that the closure was announced before any consultation—frankly, it is

shocking that a Labour-led council should do such a thing. I take the opportunity to pay tribute to the community campaigners—especially Jim Slaven and the city centre ward Scottish National Party councillor, Finlay McFarlane—who have been strongly making the case against the temporary closure by the Labour-led City of Edinburgh Council. Especially in this 900th anniversary year of Edinburgh, the People’s Story and its important working-class history must be open to the public. That must be a priority.”

LOCAL SUPPORT FOR KEEPING MUSEUM OPEN



Jim Slaven

Jim Slaven is a local resident, tour guide and expert on Scottish culture, politics and history. He is also someone who has taken on the council before when standing up for the rights of local people. (He led the campaign group to have the 35 bus route reinstated for Dumbiedykes and was active during

Covid delivering essentials to people in need). Mr Slaven told The Edinburgh Reporter that it is essential the doors are reopened while any meaningful discussion takes place. He is also firmly of the view that a new structure is essential for the museum to run sustainably.

He told us that within just a few weeks he had brought together a coalition which supports the reopening of the museum. He has involved trade unions, other community organisations, University of Edinburgh academics, top historians, musicians and writers. He said "This campaign represents the best of Edinburgh. The people closing it are the worst of Edinburgh."

He explained that notwithstanding his main demand, there is some ongoing contact with the council about the working class museum. He said: "We believe this building must stay in public hands, so the new structure must involve the elected representatives. We don't want this building taken out of council control and passed to one of their dodgy charities. We want it staying in council control, with new people coming into the board with new ideas, to get to that point, to having that positive discussion about the future.

"We've been very clear that council has to reopen the doors. We need to create a positive backdrop for these discussions to take place. People have been very, very clear with me. They want to invest in a working class Museum in Edinburgh. They want to make it a world leader, but they will not do that until the political problems that the council are resolved, until the doors are open."

Jim explained that he has spoken to several people who may wish to invest in the museum, and that there are parallels here with museums such as The Tenement Museum in New York which sets the scene of a century of New York history, recreating the homes of immigrants and refugees for an authentic look at the past.

Committee meeting

Jim presented a deputation to the Culture and Communities committee when he said: "I am not here to be confrontational, but this is an emotive issue. People feel strongly about the closure of the People's Story in such a sudden manner. I want my contribution to be constructive and find a positive outcome. The report is not a good report. It identifies a financial problem, mentions staffing issues, health and safety, Covid and suicides at the Scott Monument get more than one mention. Then the solution is to close the People's Story? That doesn't work.

"I would ask councillors to reject the report and its recommendation."

The Dumbiedykes local told the committee that even if it had been a "good report" he would still oppose the closure. He said: "It is a vital part of this city's social fabric. I have been to every housing scheme speaking to people and not one of them thought closing that museum was a good idea. That museum telling the working class history of this city with stories of workers and communities is a vital part of people in these area feeling like they belong to the city – like this is their home city. To close it would be an act of social vandalism."

Local ward councillor Joanna Mowat questioned the way in which the report was written. She also said that there is no justification in the report for closing the museum when contrasted with the scaling back of activity at the museum in Queensferry which is also mentioned.

She said: "I am concerned that there seemed to be an imbalance in the treatment of the two museums that were scheduled for changes in their opening hours: the Queensferry Museum and The People's Story. With my ward councillor hat on, what I couldn't understand was why there was a justification given about the Queensferry Museum being closed and the arrangements

going forward, yet there was no justification for People's Story. It's one sentence in the report that "we're going to close". The implicit inference in the report, is that this is about staffing issues, and there's been difficulty staffing things, but it's not made explicit. I don't think it's a particularly good report, because I think councillors should have more clarity of information than exists in it.

"This is a really important place that binds the community of Edinburgh back to its roots, to the history of the city. People's Story was created with a narrative at its heart. So it's really important that actually, we don't just split this off, that we think about how this all works together, because it is an important part of a story that quite often cities don't bother to tell. I can think of a couple of other cities that do it really well, and they're cities that actually I'm very fond of, and I'm proud they told that story. I'm proud we tell that story, and we should continue to do so."

Cllr Finlay McFarlane asked for the decision of the committee to close the museum to be referred to the next full council meeting on 7 November for further discussion. [The papers and a link to the webcast for that meeting are published here.](#)

