

Concerns councillors are 'rubber stamp' for decisions after museum closure

Edinburgh councillors have raised concerns they are a "rubber stamp" for decisions taken by officers behind closed doors, after it emerged the temporary closure of a museum had been in place for two months before they were asked to approve it.

The People's Story was shut in a bid to reduce the council's £26m in-year deficit.

Following a backlash however officers have "identified funding" to re-open the Royal Mile attraction, which focuses on the history of the Capital's working class population, from the beginning of next month.

A seasonal closure through autumn and winter, which it was estimated could save around £250k, was originally proposed.

While welcoming the u-turn, councillors questioned why their approval for the shut down was only requested at a committee in October – two months after the museum's doors were closed.

A report tabled at that meeting said as a result of a recruitment freeze there had been "instances of reactive museum closures as staffing levels have dipped below the

minimum required to maintain a full service”.

Conservative city councillor Phil Doggart said this week: “The paper that was presented to the culture and communities committee for taking a decision that had already been taken by officers was a disgrace.”

“I’m saying this because the chief executive is in the room today. Every month, whether it’s in the council or in committee, we are faced with inadequate papers that either do not include all the information we need to take decisions – or officers are taking decisions that councillors are unaware of, and we become a rubber stamp for those decisions. That is unacceptable.”

He was speaking as an update on the closure of the People’s Story was given to a full council meeting on Thursday, November 7.

Deputy Lord Provost Lezley Marion Cameron said: “I know that there was a keenly felt sense of frustration across the council that regretfully the temporary closure of the People’s Story was taken without consultation with elected members.”

Green councillor Dan Heap said: “I think we need to look again at how we got to this point.

“Why is it we had a museum dedicated to the working people, not the great and good of our city, why was that not invested in really meaningfully at all since it was set up in the late 1980s?

“Why was there such poor communication with the public and consultation with the public and also with councillors?”

Cllr Doggart continued: “We are the decision-makers in this organisation, not officers.

“It’s our responsibility to take those decisions. And until we stand up for our responsibilities, dare I say our rights as

elected members, then we're going to be faced with this throughout the term of the council until we are replaced by those who will have the guts to stand up and do it."

The council was accused of attempting to "expunge" the capital's working roots by locals and campaigners who spoke at the committee in October, where councillors rejected the continued closure until April proposed by officers and called for a plan for re-opening to come forward as soon as possible.

And the council confirmed this week the museum, housed in the historic Canongate Tollbooth, will re-open to the public on December 2 after it "listened closely to the community's passionate feedback".

Cllr Cameron said: "Meetings have been held regularly with senior officers to ensure that short and long-term solutions are being considered for the future of the People's Story museum. Meetings have also been held with trade unions representing museums staff and the community."

Culture and communities convener Councillor Val Walker said: "It's a special museum where all exhibits are inspired by the voices of Edinburgh's own people, drawn from oral histories and written accounts to share authentic stories.

"The collections showcase this with items such as Friendly Society regalia, banners, and materials representing Edinburgh's diverse communities.

"We look forward to welcoming visitors back through the museum's doors."

Jim Slaven, who has led the Save the People's Story campaign, said: "We welcome the reopening of The People's Story. It is the correct decision. This is only the first step in creating a sustainable future for Edinburgh's working class history museum in the Tolbooth building.

“This crisis has exposed the limitations of the Council.

“The city now needs to work together to help turn The People’s Story into a world leader. To update the collection and show the museum the love and attention it needs and to tell the stories of communities and workers across Edinburgh with the respect they deserve.”

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter