

Bathgate says 'No' to community centre lease

A community group has been told they will have to foot a bill of almost £90,000 a year to stay in the rooms they occupy following a shake-up to save West Lothian £1m.

Bathgate Community Centre Management Committee has rejected proposals to lease space in the town 's Partnership because its income is only £15,000 a year.

The committee has to submit proposals for January, but there is no certainty what will happen if agreement cannot be reached by April 2026 – the deadline for the council to reach its £1m budget savings by cutting community centre spending.

Across the county volunteer management committees are facing a choice of buying buildings outright or entering new lease agreements with the council.

Around 30 townspeople attended an on-line meeting on Monday night to hear that the annual bill to cover building and running costs for the 23% of the Bathgate Partnership building the council says the community centre occupies could be as much as £86,853.

This includes a 10% share of staffing costs- equal to around £40,000 per year – for two members of staff.

The committee is the latest in West Lothian to flatly reject the council's 'take it or leave it' approach to the future of community centres and village halls, where volunteer

management committees are either being asked to take out a lease on the buildings they occupy or buy them outright through community asset transfer.

The management team said: "We would be open to making an annual financial contribution to the Council, the amount would depend on our yearly income and our commitment to providing affordable space for volunteer groups, charities, and residents."

Community Council Treasurer Donald Stavert, chairing the meeting said that council finance officers saw community centres as "low hanging fruit".

He added: "This is a service which is non statutory, the council does not legally have to provide it, which is astonishing. Centres have been here for decades. I think they saw this as an easy cut but the reality is when they come and talk to the community it is a completely different matter. We're looking for a major rethink here."

The committee has suggested that some form of community interest company or charitable trust take on the management of community centres.

At the very least the committee has called on the council to drop the idea of cutting funding by 100% in one go, suggesting gradually cutting back funding to help a community-based operator gradually take control.

The management committee said a social enterprise co-operative or charity taking ownership could work with the council adding: "This collaborative approach could lead to more effective management of these vital community assets while relieving individual management committees of unsuitable financial burdens.

"The council could then gradually reduce its budget contribution to the new organisation over a number of years."

Bathgate's community centre occupies rooms in the Jim Walker Partnership, the council Partnership building in South Bridge Street. The council proposes the centre pays a lease share towards the running costs and staff of the building.

The space occupied by the community centre is disputed. Mr Stavert said that the council calculations included the former payment offices in the foyer of the building, space which the community centre has never had access to.

Those at the meeting overwhelmingly backed the management committee proposals. Tam Lynch representing community groups in Blackburn and Whitburn advised that management committees in Fauldhouse and Blackburn faced similar issues in being asked to pay for space they are occupying council partnership buildings.

Local SNP councillors Pauline Stafford and Willie Boyle lent support to the management committee, criticising the plans out forward by finance and property officers.

Councillor Stafford told the meeting there were plenty of alternatives to work in partnership with charity options and social enterprise companies such as childcare. She said these were worth exploring because the Bathgate facilities are currently underused.

"That could make a huge difference. I think this is quite a good approach to take," she added

Councillor Boyle said community centres had been a great success in opening doors for so many people.

"There is no evaluation on the social and equality and community impact that this policy decision is going to have on our communities and that is appalling."

Another contributor pointed out that any time she was in the building: "The heating is up full blast. She added: "The

heating seems to be on 24/7 and the lights are burning all the time.

“Surely they could be saving money by reducing the power they are using. I don’t heat my house 24/7.”

Mr Stavert said: “That’s the kind of thing we think the council should be looking at but they have gone for the easy option which is to save by eliminating the budget altogether.”

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter