

Midlothian Council in talks with employer over move

Midlothian Council has been holding talks with a local employer in a bid to keep them in the county as they look for smaller premises.

A meeting of the council's planning committee this week heard Dalkeith-based Charles Letts and Co are looking to downsize.

And while the workforce is largely Midlothian based it is not clear if they will be able to stay in the county.

Peter Arnsdorf, the council's planning boss, told the meeting talks were being held to support the firm and its staff.

He said: "It is very early stages. We have just been in discussion with the Letts business about their plans to move out and what happens to the site and building afterwards.

"We have been trying to find them a site in Midlothian although they are looking further afield. We have been involved in discussions to either find them an alternative site or, if we can't find one in Midlothian, then what we can do to help them maintain the Midlothian workforce."

The meeting heard Letts moved to Scotland in the Sixties in an attempt to escape the 'militant' workforce in London, and has been in Midlothian since then.

Mr Arnsdorf said Letts only currently occupied a third of the large building it used as its base. Owners of the site FLB Group, which includes Letts had lodged a Pre Application

Notice (PAN) with the council expressing their plans to build housing on the site at the town's Thornybank Industrial Estate.

However the move to turn the site, which is designated employment land, did not meet with support at the meeting.

Councillor Stephen Curran said: "At this stage I would not be in favour of this application due to pressures on school rolls and GP practices. This is important employment land"

Councillor Peter Smaill recounted the background to the business, telling the meeting: "The history of that area Letts goes back to 1800s and in the Sixties they considered the workforce in London too militant and that is why they wanted to come to Scotland and that is why they have been there for such a long time."

And Councillor Stuart McKenzie asked planners what other things they were looking at for the site.

He said: "If the housing does not go ahead are we going to get a big smoke stack or something that is going to cause a lot of noise, and dirt and mess?"

Mr Arnsdorf told the committee: "The key here is to try and have uses that generate employment but that can also sit comfortably in the larger residential area."

The PAN is an opportunity for councillors to give feedback to the applicants before they submit a planning application, if they decide to go ahead with it in the future.

Charles Letts and Co have been asked for a comment.

By Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter