

Two thirds of West Lothian community centres reject future options

More than two thirds of West Lothian community centres have rejected plans to change the way they operate as part of a bid by West Lothian Council to cut costs.

In June last year council officers proposed that centre management committees take ownership of the venues and run them as businesses – or pay increased fees for their use.

But after a consultation which has taken seven months more than 20 of 31 community centres have now rejected the proposals.

Council officials, who are looking for ways to save £1m, had also suggested extending the review to community wings in schools – which could threaten the future of community groups which rely on using those spaces.

Councillors have also raised concerns about ‘misinformation’ being spread online and urged officials to confirm that no centres would be shut under the proposals.

West Lothian Council leader Lawrence Fitzpatrick insisted the plans were necessary after eight years of ‘crippling’ council tax freezes and insisted they were not looking to close community centres.

“Eight years of council tax freezes have crippled us and every

other council," he said. "This update is essential. We are not here to close community centres. We will further engage with management committees to work with them to sustain good operating options."

While the majority of the community centres who rejected the council plans offered alternative solutions to the financial problems behind running the community halls, eight have called for no change.

Ralph Bell, Customer & Community Service Manager, told the meeting of the Executive that only two centre management committees had agreed to take on the ownership of their buildings through Community Asset Transfer.

Four more had chosen the full repair and insurance lease and two had chosen a third option to pay full charges.

Management committees of the Lanthorn Centre in Livingston, which has only just reopened, and at Stoneyburn, where RAAC has been found, asked for a year's extension on the proposals because of their changed circumstances.

Conservative group leader Damian Doran-Timson raised an amendment calling for school community wings to be excluded from the process because there had not been enough time to look at the potential effects on user groups for these buildings.

There was acknowledged that social media had played its part in fuelling misinformation and rumour around the proposals.

Labour Councillor Craig Meek said: "There's a lot of scaremongering out there and a lot of mistruths on social media.

"Just to be clear, the intention of this exercise is not to close any community centres but to get the best option for all communities, is that correct?"

Mr Bell replied: "There has been no decision, no talk of any centres or village halls closing. The intention of this engagement and exercise is to try and establish between the council and the management committees a new model of operating that would ensure that facilities remain open."

Full implementation of plans is expected to come into effect next April. Mr Bell stressed that officers will continue to work with management committees to find the best option for each centre.

Willie Boyle for the SNP raised an amendment calling for decisions to be delayed. He branded those proposals as "something taken off the shelf" and "short sighted savings" accusing the council of pulling the rug from under a lot of community organisations the council had asked to take on many tasks.

"I find that unpalatable," he added.

Councillor Tom Conn said the SNP stance had "more faces than a town clock" reminding the meeting that the group had criticised the administration for not encouraging community asset transfer in the past. He pointed to wider financial problems local councils dating from the start of the SNP control of Holyrood.

Both the Conservative and SNP amendments foundered. Cllr Fitzpatrick said: "We have heard the SNP call to drop the whole thing. We have a situation where the council picks up all the bills and management committees keep all the money and when one speaks to council taxpayers and explains that they accept that that is completely unacceptable. "

He added that officers had done a difficult job "with distinction."

Across the chamber there was unhappiness that councillors were being asked to agree proposals based on Mrs Bell's verbal

update. Sally Pattle for the Lib Dems called for more information on the study of internal and staff savings.

Mr Bell stressed that the report was an update following the January deadline given to management committees. A more comprehensive report will come back to the Corporate Policy PDSP in February and again in March to the Executive.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter