

West Lothian community group rejects £90,000 lease

A Bathgate community group has rejected plans which would have seen it paying £90,000 a year to stay in rooms it occupies in the town's Partnership building.

Bathgate Community Centre Management Committee has rejected proposals to lease space because its income is only £15,000 a year.

The proposal from West Lothian Council is one facing groups across the county as management committees have to consider taking leases of, or assuming ownership of buildings through asset transfer, to save the council £1m a year.

The Bathgate committee has instead proposed alternatives including a comprehensive review of the space, and a suggestion that a new independent organisation manages community centres in West Lothian.

Debbie Magee, secretary of the committee said: "The management committee expresses its total opposition to the council's proposal, emphasising that it represents a detrimental step for community well-being and community wealth building initiatives.

While rejecting the £90,000 the committee has said it would be prepared to pay something towards new lease costs: "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 while at the same time making financial grants to community organisations to support their activities.

“We would also commit to conducting a comprehensive review of our centre’s operations. This review will aim to develop an improvement plan that maximises community use while identifying opportunities for cost reduction and increased efficiency and additional income opportunities.”

Debbie added: “We would also like the council to seriously consider more radical alternative solutions for community centres, such as transferring their management and associated budgets to an independent organisation.

“This could take the form of a social enterprise, cooperative, non-profit company, or charity. This entity could then employ dedicated staff and implement improvements like modernized booking and invoicing systems, framework repair contracts, and joint insurance arrangements and apply for project funding from funding bodies for investment for all participating community centres.

“The council could then gradually reduce its budget contribution to the new organisation over a number of years or at the end of the current financial pressures.”

The management committee has written to all councillors requesting they scrap the current council proposals. It is also writing to all Bathgate organisations asking for their backing for their alternative proposals.

A review of use of the rooms in the South Bridge Street Partnership building, which also contains the town’s library and local council offices is also under way.

Donald Stavert speaking for the Joint Forum of Community Councils told the Local Democracy Reporting Service: “ We have

been worried about this from the start. It has created a year's worth of misery for many involved in community centres who have probably devoted years to volunteering and have not been told they have to take it on professionally."

The Joint Forum has been critical about what it calls the dire communication between the council and communities. Mr Stavert said: "They should have come to communities and said 'we have to start a conversation about the future what are your ideas', we would have had some. Instead, community centre management committees were presented with a fait accompli."

The council stressed that the January deadline for responses from management committees is simply to respond to proposals. Further negotiations will take place.

Papers going to tomorrow's meeting of the Executive will give an update to members.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter