

Labour in West Lothian accused of “running from communities” by SNP

West Lothian’s minority Labour administration have been accused of “running from communities” after a bid to discuss closure-threatened community facilities was blocked.

West Lothian’s SNP leader Councillor Janet Campbell hit out after Provost Cathy Muldoon ruled SNP budget proposals for funds to ‘save’ this week could not be debated.

Standing Orders rule that where decisions have been made, they cannot be debated within six months.

The SNP contested that a decision in January by the Executive to include school community wings and partnership buildings in the community centres savings plan was a “material change” to the initial plans and further debate should be allowed.

The budget debate on Tuesday saw a range of new investments announced, as well as cuts and an increase of 8.95% in Council Tax.

Councillor Campbell told the Local Democracy Reporting Service: “I am shocked and saddened at the ruling administration’s decision to close down a debate on saving valuable local assets, for the future of West Lothian.”

She added: “Despite working with officers to ensure this amendment was competent, the administration chose to remove

key wording from the SNP amendment in terms of saving our community centres.

“The only reason I can give for this undemocratic decision is that Labour are running away from the fact communities across West Lothian are angry at the way in which Labour’s supposed “consultation” has been received across the county.”

Speaking at a meeting of the Policy and Resources PDSP a few days before the budget Julie Whitelaw, the Head of Housing, Customer and Building Services promised further detailed talks with management committees of community centres.

She told councillors: “As reported 29 of the 31 did respond and I think that is a really positive response. I think we have to recognise that community centre management committees have undertaken a huge amount of work to review the options available they have engaged with officers they have attended workshops the next steps are to carry out further detailed work with management committees, so I think it has been a very positive response from management committees.”

Speaking after the budget meeting Councillor Campbell said the SNP group “had included funding to ensure full and proper consultation, including the provision of all information, to work with Management Committees in order to save our Community Centres in the amendment.”

Councillor Campbell said: “However, the Labour / Tory Administration rejected this out of hand and forced the SNP group to remove this from their amendment.”

Chairing the meeting the Labour Provost, Fauldhouse and Breich Valley Councillor Muldoon, told the SNP leader that she had acted on advice from the council’s Governance Manager to ask the party to withdraw the element around community centres because it contravened Standing Orders.

The SNP had also called on the council to protect nine nursery

schools which face closure later this year and proposed a Council Tax figure of 7.5%.

Commenting on the party's wider budget proposals the opposition group's depute leader, Bathgate's Pauline Stafford said: "This SNP budget amendment looked to protect valued public assets including nurseries and community centres over the long term while keeping tax rises to a minimum.

"The SNP group recognise the need for good planning and preventative spend to build stronger communities with better outcomes for our residents.

"The Labour party instead chose to coast along with more knee-jerk cuts and closures while passing on the burden of UK Labour's changes to Employer's National Insurance Contributions to council taxpayers in West Lothian."

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter