

# Month's extension to explore West Lothian community centre plans

Community centre management teams will have another month to explore potential future funding plans including increasing charges as part of wider budget cutbacks aiming to save £1m.

In an update to councillors the head of Housing Customer and Building Services Julie Whitelaw said that the revised saving plans which were scheduled to come to the council Executive in early March would be pushed back to the April meeting.

A meeting of the Corporate Policy and Resources PDSP heard this will give more time to look at alternative funding sources. It was welcomed by John Sivis representing the Joint Forum of Community Councils speaking on behalf of community centre management teams which had contacted the Forum.

And SNP group leader Janet Campbell asked why the update was necessary at all given the assurances council leader Lawrence Fitzpatrick had given to this local community council this week that no centres would be lost.

In May last year the council went to management committees of all community centres with three options for the future in the bid to save more than £1m.

The three options were 1 – Transfer of ownership under Community Asset Transfer (CAT). • 2: Full Repairing and Insuring lease agreements (FRI lease). • 3: Recharging operating costs to Community Centre Management Com (default arrangement).

To date only two management committees- Winchburgh and West Calder- have chosen the first option, four have chosen the

second and two the third. The majority of the 29 who have responded – 12 – have chosen alternative solutions.

These solutions included the establishment of arms length organisations to run the centres and phased implementation of changes and introduction of costs.

Councillors heard that none of these solutions would help achieve the £1m savings as plans currently stand: little over half that sum- £570,000- would be saved if the plan progresses without change.

Some management committees have agreed to look at increasing charges and costs to user groups.

The report highlighted that where there are no management committees or no obvious way ahead council officers would look to engage with the wider community , or the management teams of neighbouring centres to seek ways of keeping venues operational.

Mrs Whitelaw said: “The report proposes that the lease with recharge of costs will be the default for all remaining management committees and officers will seek approval from council Executive to progress new lease arrangements.

“Further discussions will be required with management committees to conform the level recharge to ensure the level of savings can be met and this will include a review of charging policies and opportunities to generate additional income as well as a review of the staffing required to support the operation of the community centre.”

Councillor Campbell said: “Do we believe that the engagement carried out has succeeded with the management of local facilities given the number of hostile responses we have had?”

Mrs Whitelaw said: “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.”

Commenting on claims that the plan had been well thought out Councillor Cambell suggested the inclusion only in January of school community wings and partnerships centres in the saving plans suggested this was not the case.

Mr Sivis said: “Whilst we appreciate the amount of work that’s already gone into this exercise it’s obvious from responses that extra time will be required because if we are going to raise charges and look for new groups it is going to take time to do that. Therefore an extension is very important.

“One of the other things that community centre managements have said to us is that they would like to see a more detailed breakdown of costs and projections going forwards. Most are volunteers and have probably never have been faced with this before and the understanding of and ability to deal with it will take a little bit more time.”

Stuart Barrie from the Voluntary Sector Gateway agreed that management teams would welcome further discussion

Labour veteran Councillor Tom Conn said that the council would not be in the position of having to make such cuts if it had been adequately funded by the SNP Scottish Government.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter