

# **Campaigners win two-month reprieve on plans to close community café**

**Campaigners have won a two-month reprieve on plans to close a community café in a retirement home complex in Bathgate.**

West Lothian's Integration Joint Board, which oversees social care, agreed to postpone plans to close the café in Rosemount Gardens as part of budget cuts.

The complex's café is open six days per week but currently operates at a loss of £100,000 per year because of a lack of custom.

Local councillors who have fought the plan believe the café has been chosen as low hanging fruit and question what effective savings would be.

Having listened to the debate in Livingston's Civic Centre on Tuesday Bathgate councillors also pointed out that hundreds of signatures had been missed out in a presentation to the Board. They say that almost 1,000 signatures have been collected in the last fortnight, Councillors and non-voting members of the IJB heard of just over 600 names collected.

The councillors have also called for further details behind the closure proposals as they bid to keep the café and community space open.

The IJB's Chief Financial Officer, Hamish Hamilton, told the

meeting: "All savings measures have been developed taking up feedback from the consultation exercises in 2022 and 2025 and proposals are grouped under efficiency, transformation and difficult choices

"Looking forward to 26/27 it is likely the service provision will have to reduce or in some cases cease"

It was asked why the café had apparently only been added to the savings plan after the budget decision by West Lothian Council in February. Bathgate's SNP councillors, Willie Boyle and Pauline Stafford said in a statement: "The IJB should have known about this proposal being a possible option for some considerable time. It is inconceivable that this proposal was only considered from the sign off of the West Lothian budget two weeks ago."

The councillors questioned where savings could be made if staff were to be redeployed and pointed out that the café had operated from the outset as a non-profit making operation, and repeated requests from staff to increase café prices had been turned down by the council.

The meeting heard that the public space occupied by the café would be retained. The projected savings were doubted by councillor Stafford and Boyle who attended the public meeting from the public gallery. They also expressed doubts that it would cost the IJB £50,000 to keep the café open and operational for two months while efforts are made to secure its future.

The £50,000 figure was earmarked to be put aside as an approximate figure to offset slippage on savings if a budget decision was delayed.

Councillor Tom Conn, chair of the IJB, had initially suggested closure as proposed by officers as part of the budget decision.

Fellow Labour councillor Tony Boyle had proposed a three-month delay to give campaigners a chance to secure a future for the café. This was backed by independent councillor Andrew McGuire.

Councillor Conn suggested a compromise of a two month stay, but he stressed that the proposals brought back would have to be concrete. This won the support of councillors and voting members.

After the meeting Councillors Boyle and Stafford said: "This facility has become a very important focal point to the community. A recent purpose-built place that promised so much to the individuals who moved in and others that bought into a community hub to integrate residents with an important link to community activities and resolve issues that can arise with isolation. Now this proposal risks ripping that apart."

Councillor Stafford, the SNP depute group leader commented: "We believe this savings proposal risks being perceived as a desk-top exercise and we are calling for a full and detailed community consultation on this specific savings measure.

"This facility provides an invaluable and well used service to both residents of the supported accommodation and the wider community enabling those with health or mobility issues to socialise and feel part of their community.

"There will undoubtedly be knock on costs required to mitigate the effects should the facility close and the SNP group will continue pushing to see the detailed analysis of these costs".

And in a detailed document the councillors highlighted: "When the café was set up nine years ago it was as a non-profit making service. Money coming in covered the cost of operation; 60% towards energy and building requirements, 40% provisions.

No cost was attributed to staff costs, why?"

And after the IJB meeting they asked: "With a no redundancy policy where do the staff go and who picks up the cost of transferring them somewhere else. Where is the real saving?"

"What are the costs with regard to the provision of ordering food and delivery services to meet what is offered in the tenancy agreements?"

"No suggestion regarding any consideration of closure was aired until two weeks ago. Any direct consultation amounted to one meeting, arranged the day before, with kitchen staff and an impromptu discussion with customers who happened to be there at the time."

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter