

Craigshill charity takes on its council building home for £1

A Livingston based charity has won a bid to take on the council building it occupies for just £1.

Council estate officers had backed the transfer of the former Almondbank Library in Craigshill to Spark, which started out as the Craigshill Good Neighbour Network.

But officers had recommended a £60,000 price tag on the building – half of the market value.

Of the four council buildings transferred under asset transfer rules since 2016, three were transferred for £1. The last capital asset transfer, of St David's House, a three story office building in Bathgate transferred to the town's mosque at costs of £600,000-a 30% reduction of the market value.

Before that the former Low Port outdoor centre in Linlithgow had transferred to a local church for just £1.

Scott Hughes, the council's Strategic Property Asset Manager said each transfer was made on its own merits. The last one had been made after the asset transfer legislation had "beefed up" the wording around recouping costs.

He told a meeting of the Asset Transfer Committee: "We as officers and you as elected members are consistently beating the drum telling members of the public that the council is experiencing severe financial hardships. In that context there

are taxpayers out there who will and do justifiably ask why then are we giving away our land and property assets.”

He added: “The recommendation here is considered to be reasonable middle ground that would provide comfort to the wider public that officers are seeking to secure income from the sale of its assets whilst recognising the important work that Spark does in and around Craigshill.”

Elsa Campbell, representing Spark, said that the charity had applied to the Scottish Land Fund for funds that it had hoped would meet the costs of refurbishing the building and improving its energy efficiency. The charity was unsure as to whether the fund would allow grant aid to be spent on purchase costs.

Councillor Harry Cartmill asked if the £60,000 could “be a dealbreaker”. Ms Campbell replied “For the Scottish Land Fund?, I don’t know, perhaps.”

Spark had hoped to obtain the building at no cost given the amount of social value the charity delivers in services across West Lothian. A measure of just part of the work the charity does suggested its social value was in excess of £500,000- nine times the £60,000 price tag officers had suggested.

Charing the committee, the Provost, Councillor Cathy Muldoon proposed that the transfer, at a cost of £60,000 to Spark should go through as recommended.

Proposing an alternative, Councillor Craig Meek said: “I would like to move that we work as we have been constantly in terms of supporting these organisations to take over buildings. Given the significant community benefit I would transfer in line with what we have done for others, for £1.”

That charity will have to pay for decoupling the original electrical supply and setting up a new one and installing a

new heating system into the building.

Alex Fleming , Chief Officer of Spark told the Local Democracy Reporting Service: “Yesterday’s decision to approve the transfer for £1 is fantastic for Spark as it means now the £60,000 initially requested can be invested back in to upgrading the building, employing another member of staff and ensuring some of the community asks which came out in our consultations can begin to be carried out.

“We are grateful to the officers at WLC for their advice in getting to this point and to the committee for understanding the broader impact of their decision to transfer for a nominal fee.”

As an organisation, Spark’s membership and volunteer numbers has grown significantly over the last 18 months, as has the number and type of activities and events it delivers. Events such as our inaugural Spark in the Park, last year which saw approx. 3,000 people attend a free family event in Craigshill.

Mr Fleming added: “In order to deliver over and above our weekly activities, we work in partnership with lots of other third sector and community organisations and it is our plan to be able to establish a collaborative hub, in the additional space where organisations can work from and generate ideas based on community need which can be delivered in partnership.”

A spokesperson for West Lothian Council outlined that a community asset transfer (CAT) is when a community group takes control of public land or buildings and uses them as a means of delivering positive outcomes for their community.

They added: “West Lothian Council recognises that the ownership of property assets (land and buildings) can contribute to the empowerment of communities and can present opportunities for community groups to access external funding

that is not available from or to the council.”

By Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter