

Free exercise sessions scrapped for hundreds of users

Hundreds of vulnerable Midlothian residents will have to pay for access to sports centres after the council scrapped free sessions.

Carers have reacted with anger after the local authority decided to introduce a charge for people who have previously been able to access its sports and leisure facilities for free.

It comes after they approve plans to close gym facilities at two sports centres at weekends and reduce opening hours at swimming pools in a bid to save money.

Midlothian Council said it was the only local authority in Scotland offering free access to its facilities and the new £2.30 charge per session was the minimum concessionary rate.

A spokesperson added that carers who need to accompany people to the centres would continue to be allowed to go along for free.

Holders of Access to Midlothian Cards in the county are able to use swimming pools, gyms, exercise classes and bowling across the county either for free or at a reduced rate.

People entitled to free use included those receiving disability payments, both adults and children, at the higher rates including people who receive Personal Independence

Payment (PIP), Employment & Support Allowance (ESA) and Attendance Allowance at the higher rate.

The decision to introduce a charge is part of the council's budget for the year ahead and will be introduced on April 1, however carers say it will come as a surprise to many users unaware it was approved.

One council employee who works with users said: "This charge has been approved with barely a word to anyone and just as little thought.

"Access to these facilities are crucial for users and their carers and families and so important for their physical and mental health and well-being.

"A £2.30 a session charge might seem small but for our most vulnerable residents it will quickly become unaffordable and mean they will no longer be able to use these facilities.

"Long term it will create more problems for the health and social care services as people are no longer able to access these important facilities."

A spokesperson for Midlothian Council confirmed the move will mean more than 600 people will have to pay for services which until now have been free.

They said: "Currently we're the only local authority in Scotland offering free access to our sport and leisure facilities to customers who meet the eligibility criteria.

"From April, those 620 customers will be charged our minimum concessionary rate of £2.30 per visit. If they have a carer, their carer will continue to come along for free.

"We realise this will be disappointing for people currently accessing our facilities for free through the Access to Midlothian scheme.

“The new charging policy will bring us in line with other local authorities.

“As well as the 620 customers who are eligible for free access to our facilities, there are around 280 customers who qualify for a concessionary rate of approximately 40% less than the full price of the activity (not including the over 60s who also get a concessionary rate). The concessionary rate will continue.”

By Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter