

Sad day as West Lothian nurseries close

It's hard to think of a council meeting where everyone in the room wished they could be somewhere else.

The weight of the decisions taken on Tuesday took shape in the 800 pages that sat before councillors at the Education Executive. On paper the anxiety of communities across West Lothian was more tangible than the simple arithmetic of the argument could ever be presented digitally.

Many across the chamber said they did not want to take the decisions they faced. The SNP's Andrew Miller summed it up: "It's a sad day."

One by one the Executive went through the nine nursery schools listed for closure. Greg Welsh, the head of Early Years and Childcare spent the day reading through the reports behind each nursery from initial meetings to parental responses, and the responses of officers.

First up was Bathgate West, and even though long-shuttered this commanded 62 pages – the least but not by much. Linlithgow Bridge ran to 140 pages, most of the others between 70 and 90. Some 752 to cover the nine nurseries.

All were closely typed pages of anxieties for the future, for their children and for their towns and villages. Some of these nurseries had welcomed their first children in the 1960s.

One parent wrote: "Some parents, myself included, rely on their child attending 4 full days to allow them to continue to work. I also cannot afford to have my child attend a private nursery and have to pay for the additional hours that I require to work round work."

Another said: "My son has been attending since January! He is now just about to turn 3 in November, he has a hard time talking and the staff know how to work him! They understand him and he has built up good trust and bond with these people! It is also causing myself as his mother great distress."

There was also resentment: "We didn't ask for this. Our kids didn't ask for this. So why put more stress onto families just for the sake of the council wanting to close the nurseries?"

"This closure makes me very concerned for the future of these children integrating with others and achieving a successful educational journey through their school years.

"This situation is also difficult for teachers having to help more and more children settle in who are in new surroundings."

Stacked up against the heartfelt anxiety of words was the heartless logic of the numbers.

The council has capacity for 6,814 nursery children but has over 2,000 more places available than is required to meet demand.

When the national Funding Follows the Child policy was introduced in 2019 there were seven private partner providers in West Lothian for 4,290 eligible children (88.4% of those came to council settings).

Following the introduction of the policy, there are now 32 private partner providers in West Lothian for 4,084 eligible children (78.0% of those come to council settings)

Since 2019, there has been an increase of 25 private nurseries delivering services for less children, demonstrating that there is an over-provision in Early Learning & Childcare options in West Lothian.

Demand for nursery places overall is also likely to reduce in the years ahead – with a falling number of births in Scotland. Although a small number of areas have seen growth in the number of young people, population changes across the country is reducing overall demand for spaces in many council nursery and childcare facilities.

Mr Welsh, the council's Head of Education (Primary and Early Years) said: "These are difficult decisions that have to be considered and we do not take a change like this lightly. We know that some parents will be disappointed with our recommendation.

"In this case, the data shows us that we have more physical capacity than we need – nearly 30% more. That is significant and we know that demand will continue to fall in the years ahead."

The nurseries threatened are all within schools. Some schools will utilise the space for primary. The nurseries could also re-open should there be future demand.

Speaking at the close of a long day of unhappy decisions on Tuesday, Chair of the Education Executive Andrew McGuire answered criticism from the SNP that the decisions were short-sighted and that the Labour administration had lagged behind in creative thinking to meet the requirements of parents.

He said: "These are decisions none of us want to make. It's my very firmly held view that these very difficult decisions that we're taking with regard to nurseries is good strategic planning. This is us planning for the future."

Councillor Andrew Miller said: "No other council has proposed

the depths of cuts we have proposed today. We have promoted the decline of our services rather than taken the chance to promote the excellence of our services. It's a very sad day."

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter