

Volunteers' input key to help to shape future of local community centres

Volunteers' input is key to help to shape the future of local community centres, West Lothian's council leader has said.

The council is working to hand over the running of more than 30 community venues to local communities in a bid to cut costs.

This has sparked concerns over whether the current numbers of community centres will be protected, and with a deadline of next Spring for the "huge work" to be completed one councillor warned "we are sleepwalking into closures".

An update on work to divest the community centres was presented to the council's executive committee this week.

SNP group leader Janet Campbell told the meeting: "The goalposts have shifted, and this is policy-making on the hoof."

But Council leader Lawrence Fitzpatrick said that current system could not continue and thanked volunteers for taking part in the consultation process, adding: "their feedback will help shape the process going forward."

Responses to consultation were received from all but one of the management groups, with two requested additional time due to their specific circumstances.

Two organisations said they were looking at a Community Asset Transfer (CAT) request to take over the facility themselves, with others considering this in the future.

Four groups gave a Full Repairing and Insuring Lease as their preferred option, with two preferring a Recharge of Costs model. Details of each agreement will have to be worked out on an individual basis.

The majority of management committees put forward alternative suggestions, such as a different method of financial contributions or the creation of a Trust or arms-length external organisation (ALEO). Further work will now be carried out with all the management committees to confirm a new sustainable model of operation.

If this is not possible, other options, such as engaging with other non-profit organisations to see if they would like to take on the management role, will be considered.

A timetable for the rest of the project has also been agreed, which aims to have an agreed option for every community centre implemented by Spring 2026.

Community wings in schools were included only in January with the idea that savings could be produced from a standardised letting procedure across the school's estate. It was this late addition which prompted the SNP claim that goalposts had been moved.

SNP group depute leader Pauline Stafford at least 12 centres were looking at having to find a massive increase in income to meet the new costs. It was a huge amount of work for staff and volunteers, she said.

She added: "I'd like to see more leadership from the administration so that we don't sleepwalk into closures."

Councillor Campbell said that much of the information

contained in the March report was “outdated and inaccurate”.

Julie Whitelaw, Head of Housing and Customer Services said the details of the current report were based on results from January surveys of community centres, and that officers were in ongoing dialogue with centres.

She added: “It’s very positive that there has been significant progress.”

Councillor Campbell said: “I’d just like to say thank you to officers and I acknowledge that you have been given an almost impossible task. The goalposts have shifted, and we have policy making on the hoof.”

Adding that councillor Fitzpatrick had already promised that no centre should close, she suggested: “should we go back to square one and start the process again?”.

Lib Dem Sally Pattle said it had been clear from the outset that the current model was unsustainable. She stressed that the amount of work done already proved that a cookie cutter solution was not practicable for the diverse range of community facilities and acknowledged that the exercise had been stressful for community centre management committees and council officers to produce a more sustainable portfolio.

She added: “I think we are still a long way away from that, but I look forward to more information in June.”

Officers are working with community venues to encourage greater use of the centres and ways to increase income streams.

Labour’s Tom Conn suggested that MSPs and MPs, who have office cost budgets, could contribute more to use the centre’s venues for surgeries. He also took aim at the SNP opposition group accusing it of refusing to acknowledge that financial restrictions imposed by the Scottish Government forced the

council to make changes to the funding of community venues.

Councillor Fitzpatrick said after the meeting: "It's fantastic to see good progress is being made to ensure every community in West Lothian will have sustainable facilities going forward.

"Most people understand the current system, where the council incurs all the costs but gets none of the income, cannot be justified any longer. We must change the way they operate, to ensure that all our communities will continue to have a centre for local use in the future.

"A huge thanks to all the management committees who have taken the time to provide feedback. Many have put in a great deal of work already, and their feedback will help shape the process going forward."

Councillor Fitzpatrick added: "I would also like to thank all the council officers and those in the voluntary sector who are working to assist management committees find a revised operating model that works for everyone."

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter