

Council could run bulk of West Lothian's community centres

The bulk of West Lothian's community centres could end up being run directly by the council.

The new option was tabled after councillors heard that only around half of the £1m needed savings have been identified through communities taking ownership of centres or signing new leases.

It has raised concern that council control could see reduced opening and higher costs for community groups to use facilities. One centre management team member said increased costs would hit "families already struggling to get by."

The SNP branded the council control option as "haphazard and improvised". Council officers said the new option was a result of ongoing engagement with all community centre management committees.

One management committee member told the Local Democracy Reporting Service: "Our community has many residents who already struggle to get by."

"The community centre activities in the past have asked for a minimum amount to take part, eg £1 to attend a disco. If we raised these fees the kids would not be able to attend. If you have five kids asking eg £5 each this would be £25 out of a family budget."

"The community centre was always seen as for the community."

In a report to the Corporate Policy and Resources PDSP, Julie Whitelaw the head of Housing, Customer and Building Services said that the council management option could apply to 26 of the 31 centres.

Updated proposals would deliver savings of £576,482, leaving a shortfall of £496,518 against the savings target of £1.073 million.

Mrs Whitelaw said: "Under this model the council would operate the facilities and representatives of user groups would be invited to attend regular 'Building User Groups' to aid in the development of activities which would meet the needs of the local community.

"In order for the council to meet such a cost there would be a requirement to reduce operating costs, through rationalising staffing resource and energy usage, considering the occupancy and use of the building and increasing income from the lets".

Council management is the fourth option for centres, and would see the council full taking control of running the premises, setting opening hours, staffing and charges

The initial three options on the table are: Community asset transfer where the communities assume full ownership of the building. Full repair and Insurance Lease of the building and Recharge of Costs where the management committee leases the building and pays council to maintain it.

Councillor Janet Campbell, the SNP group leader, said told the meeting that the fourth option had been dropped into the mix in the last week and was "haphazard and apparently improvised."

She added that she knew of two management committees that were "left feeling vulnerable" at the introduction of the fourth option, and she asked whether committees which had chosen one of the original options: full ownership, lease or lease with

recharge costs could reconsider.

Mrs Whitelaw said that management committees could reconsider any choices made as the engagement process continued.

Mrs Whitelaw stressed that the council management option had been shared with all management committees along with: “the implications we would require to look at reduction in operating models looking at sustainable models.”

She reiterated that the process was designed to keep community centres open and running.

Councillor Susan Manion, the deputy council leader, said there had been an ongoing narrative on social media, and promoted by some councillors, that the council plan was to close community centres.

She added: “There has been an active narrative out there to discourage management committees to get involved because the council just intends to close centres. That seems to come from some councillors who should know better as well.

“That has not helped at all in what we are trying to do, to help community centres move forward positively with the recognition that they need to be financially viable. The narrative has really hindered the process.”

“What this update shows is our determination to continue to support the community centres that we have and using all the options available to support community centres thrive.”

Simon Henderson, the Third Sector rep with the Voluntary Sector Gateway told the meeting: “The VSG recognises the hard work that council officers and volunteer management committees have put into this consultation and the engagement there’s been. The building user groups are often community groups or volunteer led groups that are likely to be most affected in any of these changes.

“It is positive to see the engagement planned and these groups can hopefully be part of the solution for all buildings and also have the same levels of commendable support council officers are providing with the management committees.”

John Sives from the Joint Forum of Community Councils said it had accepted that the status quo could not continue and appreciated “the one-to-one approach” from council officers in dealing with management committees.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter