

Political row erupts over the closure of eight nurseries in West Lothian

A political row has erupted over the closure of eight nurseries in West Lothian.

The council's opposition SNP said the blame for the controversial decision lies "squarely with the Labour /Tory administration."

The group's comment came after the SNP Government's education minister confirmed he would not use his powers to stop the closures.

The Local Democracy Reporting Service revealed last week that Holyrood ministers effectively agreed with the Education Executive's decision to shut the nurseries at the end of June.

The council has capacity for 6,814 nursery children but has over 2,000 more places available than is required to meet demand, nearly 30% more than is needed.

In a response to the LDRS request for a comment on the Government's decision, the SNP group said: "The blame for closure of these valued West Lothian nurseries lies squarely with the Labour/Tory administration of West Lothian Council."

"Failure to listen to parents about their needs resulted in poor planning for nursery provision in some of the most deprived areas of West Lothian."

The group added: "SNP members of West Lothian Council Education Executive argued strongly against the closure of each of the nurseries in the meeting and we continue to assert that the closures should be at least postponed so meaningful

and fair consultation can take place about the future of nursery provision in West Lothian.”

The group added its support to comments from ministers about the way in which the council’s education department went about the consultation process: “The West Lothian SNP Group agrees with the Scottish Government’s view that consulting on nine nursery closures simultaneously, combined with errors in some of the relevant published documents, was detrimental to the engagement during the consultation process.”

The opposition group managed to stop the closure of one nursery on the hit list at the Education Executive committee. Only Glenvue Nursery School, in Livingston, garnered enough support on an opposition amendment to stay open, by one vote.

The decline in council run nurseries is a direct result of changes to Scottish Government national policy made in 2019 – where the Government introduced ‘funding follows the child’. This means that parental choices have changed with many parents now choosing to use their funded nursery provision at private nursery providers and childminders in West Lothian. This has significantly reduced the demand for council run nurseries.

When the national policy was introduced, there were seven private partner providers in West Lothian for 4,290 eligible children, and 88% of those came to council settings. There are now 32 private partner providers in the county for 4,084 eligible children, and 78% of those come to council settings.

Responding to the initial press release, which suggested that nine nurseries would close Council leader Lawrence Fitzpatrick said: “I think it says it all that the West Lothian SNP Group try to attack the administration over errors when they can’t even get their facts correct in their own

press release in terms of the numbers of nurseries affected.

“Last week, the Government approved the closures of eight nurseries and highlighted some areas for improvement for officers to take forward. However, let’s not lose sight over the most important facts; last week the SNP Scottish Government did not call in the decision to close the nurseries and has effectively approved the closure of eight nurseries in West Lothian.

“Why? Perhaps they recognise like most people do that the key reduction in council run nurseries is a direct result of changes to the Scottish Government’s own national policy made in 2019 – where the Government introduced ‘funding follows the child’.

“This has significantly reduced the demand for council run nurseries and this policy is now coming back to bite the SNP.”

The Labour council leader added: “With our budgets being destroyed by the SNP at Holyrood, councils are rightly and legally expected to operate efficiently and manage local public finances and the reality is that there is far more flexibility within nursery provision than there was before.

“As far back as 2016, Council officers have advised the Scottish Government on more than one occasion that a model founded on unfettered choice, would be likely to prove unsustainable, and to the detriment of all eligible children and their parents/carers. Especially with a declining national birth rate.

“Unfortunately, Scottish Ministers have chosen not to act on these representations, with the consequence that there has been a major diversion of funds to the private sector with the result that it is not possible to maintain the services offering maximum continuity and ease of transition into primary schools.

He added: "A few years ago, West Lothian was 17th out of 32 councils for educational attainment in Scotland. We are now 3rd out of 32 councils, and this demonstrates our commitment to Education in West Lothian. The facts speak for themselves.

"The SNP's pathetic attempts to shift the blame onto council officers or the Administration will not distract us from ensuring that Education in West Lothian continues to go from strength to strength under this Labour administration."

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter