

West Lothian's plans for community centres have been branded a "massive own goal"

West Lothian's plans for community centres have been branded a "massive own goal" by a councillor who thinks the £1m savings the council wants are unachievable.

The council wants community centre management committees to either assume full ownership of centres or take on new leases, paying increased maintenance costs and charging more to user groups.

Livingston North SNP member Andrew Miller said he won't be surprised if most centres opt for full council control – a new option proposed last week.

Many fear that option will lead to closure as prices rise and public use drops off.

And Councillor Miller claimed the council had pushed "unrealistic options" onto volunteer management committees.

Management centre volunteers in his North Livingston ward warned increased costs will see users denied services.

A volunteer on the management committee at Mosswood community centre in Knightsridge, one of Livingston's poorest communities, told the Local Democracy Reporting Service: "The truth is that the council has always managed these facilities—controlling staffing levels, working hours,

handling all invoices and payments, and managing building services including heating.

“They are not stepping in as saviours; they are simply altering a service they already control.”

The volunteer added that talk of “saving” centres from closure was misleading and added: “I know the council will say that you could put a minimum charge onto the meals, but if you have a large family, it might be too expensive. This might be the only time the family get to eat out together. It will be a great loss.”

Councillor Miller, who also volunteers at the centre, told the LDRS: “The council administration has scored a massive own goal. Instead of working with community centres to see how they could cut costs and increase income, they have pushed unrealistic options.

“I would not be surprised to see the majority of centres return to council control, the council will lose its rates relief, usage will drop, and they just won’t achieve the savings they are aiming for.”

Mosswood hosts the Vennie Food Outlet which raises money for the local youth centre and provides low-cost food to local people and also acts as a point of contact for services. That shop could be lost.

The volunteer added: “The proposed pricing changes will make services unaffordable for many, particularly The Vennie food outlet which provides essential nutrition to families in our area. Furthermore, the planned closure of the shop will inflict real hardship on our community, both financially and emotionally.

“Income generated from the shop directly funds vital programs for children and young people in Knightsridge. This revenue stream supports our community’s future—our children—and its

loss will be keenly felt.”

She added: “When assessing the value of community centres, we must look beyond balance sheets. The true cost of these changes will be paid in increased isolation, diminished mental health, and fewer opportunities for our young people.”

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

Council officers stressed that the option for assuming management control had emerged from ongoing consultation with management committees. Committees had also been made aware of the need to increase charges for user groups.

Only around £560,000 worth of the £1m projected savings had so far been identified.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter