

# WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

## Report by the Chief Executive

Council: 17 January 2007

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**Subject: Decision Making Processes relating to the Closure of Renton Library, Renton Community Education Centre and Leven Cottage Care Home**

### **1. Purpose**

- 1.1** The purpose of this report is to present to Members the findings of the Chief Executive's investigation into decision making processes prior to the closures of Renton Library, Renton Community Education Centre and Leven Cottage Care Home and, as a result, allow the Council to review those decisions.

### **2. Background**

- 2.1** In February 2006 the 2006/2007 revenue budget proposals were presented to full Council. As has been the case with all previous budget setting exercises, and in order to achieve the lowest possible increase in the level of Council Tax, the proposals included a range of savings options for Members' consideration. As part of this savings package, two facilities, namely Renton Public Library and Renton Community Education Centre, were identified for closure. These proposals were approved at the Council meeting on 9 February 2006.
- 2.2** After the decision in February 2006 legal action was raised to halt the closure of both premises.
- 2.3** On 31 March 2006 both the Library and Community Education Centre closed.
- 2.4** As part of the decision to close Renton Library it had been agreed that the book stock would be offered to the Carman Centre in Renton. However due to 'lack of space' this offer was not accepted by the Centre.
- 2.5** In June 2006 the legal action as it pertained to Renton Library was withdrawn to allow consideration of the sale of the library to West Dumbarton Muslim Education Society. The library building was sold in August 2006 and the stock was transferred out of the library at that stage.
- 2.6** Also at that time, an assurance was given to the local councillor that, when a suitable venue was agreed, a range of library books and resources would be given to re-stock a library facility in Renton.

- 2.7** As part of the decision to close Renton Community Education Centre it had been agreed that alternative facilities would be identified for all users.
- 2.8** The Centre was closed at the end of March. Offers were made to all users regarding alternative provision both within the area of Renton and in adjacent areas. Most of the user groups relocated as proposed.
- 2.9** As Members are aware, West Dunbartonshire Council was the subject of an Audit Scotland Best Value inspection in January – March 2006 and the manner in which the above facilities were discontinued emerged as an issue in the subsequent Audit Scotland Best Value Report. It was stated in the report that decisions were made by full Council based on no supporting papers to inform the decision, no analysis of alternative options and little information on whether this had been the subject of any consultation with the community or elected members.
- 2.10** The closure of Leven Cottage Residential Unit for older people had been under consideration since 2001 and proposals for closure were put forward to the Health Improvement and Social Justice Partnership (HISJ) in August and November of 2005. The HISJ Partnership, which is a sub-committee of the Council with delegated powers of decision making, approved the closure after consultation on 23 November 2005.
- 2.11** The Audit Scotland report highlighted concerns of opposition elected members that issues of such significance should be agreed by the full Council. Audit Scotland highlighted the complexity of the governance arrangements within the HISJ and that such arrangements should be reviewed. The findings of the Audit Scotland report did not express concerns about the merits of the decision to close Leven Cottage.
- 2.12** Allegations were also made in evidence to the recent public hearing in November 2006, conducted by Accounts Commission, as to irregularities in the Council's decision-making process.
- 2.13** In light of the above, the Chief Executive instructed a full investigation into the circumstances surrounding the closure of these facilities.

### **3. The Investigation**

- 3.1** The investigation, which was carried out on behalf of the Chief Executive by the Director of Education and Cultural Services and Director of Social Work, focussed on the decision making process with regard to budgetary proposals, including savings options, and upon the particular circumstances associated with the proposals to close facilities in Renton.

#### **4. Issues Emerging from the Investigation: The Decision Making Process**

- 4.1 Within West Dunbartonshire Council, it has traditionally been the case that budget proposals for Council originate at service directorate level. Within each departmental directorate, officers are charged to review their aspect of the service and make initial proposals for savings.
- 4.2 This process relies on the professional knowledge of officers as to the usage, running costs and contribution of a particular service, and the potential impact of any reduction in the level of a service. In common with practice in other council departments, each section of the Education and Cultural Services department is involved in this process.
- 4.3 In the budget proposals for 2006/07, Renton Library and Renton CE Centre were put forward as potential savings through closure based on officers' professional knowledge as described above. Also proposed for closure was the Education Resource Service, based at Faifley Primary School.
- 4.4 The departmental savings proposals, including the proposals to close Renton Library and Renton Community Education Centre were approved by the Corporate Management Team. A copy of the savings options was passed to the Labour Administration and Leader of the Opposition prior to the Budget Meeting on 9 February 2006.
- 4.5 As stated above, these particular proposals, contained within a range of savings proposals, received Council approval at its meeting of 9 February 2006

#### **5. Issues Emerging from the Investigation: Proposals to Close Renton Community Centre and Renton Library**

- 5.1 The process as described, which commenced in November/December 2005 prior to proposals going to CMT and thereafter to Council was in line with regular practice within West Dunbartonshire Council.
- 5.2 The proposals were put forward by professional officers based on their knowledge of the service as a whole and of the relevant issues pertaining to these specific proposals.

##### **5.3.1 Rationale for the Closure of Renton Library**

The proposal that Renton Library be closed and alternative provision made to provide a library service to the Renton community was based on the following factors:

- Renton Library had the smallest number of visitors, the lowest borrowing rate and the lowest level of internet usage of all West Dunbartonshire Libraries;
- it was proposed that the library stock be offered to the Renton community subsequent to negotiation over suitable premises to house the collection;
- library staff were offered alternative employment at no detriment to their conditions or remuneration;
- consideration was given to extending the range of the mobile library service to meet the needs of those disadvantaged by the closure.

### **5.3.2 Rationale for the Closure of Renton Community Education Centre**

The proposal that Renton Community Education Centre be closed and the user groups relocated was based on the following factors:

- the centre was operating at 60% of its maximum capacity, placing amongst the least used of West Dunbartonshire's community education centres;
- closer inspection of the type of usage revealed that the principal user of the centre was Renton Primary School, which was itself operating well below its maximum capacity and was therefore in a position to relocate the classes using the Community Education Centre to accommodation within the school;
- membership of some of the user groups was drawn from an area much wider than the village of Renton and it was therefore reasonable to assume that those who travelled to Renton could travel to an alternative venue;
- membership of some of the groups was very low;
- the nearby Carman Centre ensured that the village of Renton was not left without a meeting place for social events;
- the proximity of the Alexandria Community Education Centre meant that most of the relocated groups did not have far to travel, and vulnerable groups would be offered assistance with transport;
- community education staff were offered alternative employment at no detriment to their conditions or remuneration;

**5.4** All of the above notwithstanding, and associated primarily with the tight timescale within which budget savings proposals had to be formulated and agreed, the above information was not made available to or discussed with the Renton community prior to these decisions being made. In addition, the information was not tabled or attached to papers going before Members, although it was available for any Elected Member seeking information from the relevant officers.

**5.5** It is perhaps worth noting that the retired Director of Education and Cultural Services, when contacted in connection with this investigation, was surprised that this had emerged as an issue in the Audit Scotland

report, since at no time during the inspection period had he been questioned about the closure of these facilities.

## **5.6 Rationale for the Closure of Leven Cottage**

**5.6.1** The decision to close Leven Cottage was based on two main factors. The unsuitability of the facility in terms of Care Commission Standards and health and safety issues which could not be addressed without unreasonable cost and the relatively high unit costs of the service. Following the sale of Leven Cottage to the Cordale Housing Association the Council has provided home care and housing support services, through the Carman Centre, a local social care provider, to the clients who remained in Leven Cottage. Communities Scotland have funded adaptations to Leven Cottage to improve living arrangements. Their care needs have been reviewed on a regular basis. The Carman Centre have been in discussion with the Council and Communities Scotland about developing the use of Leven Cottage as a resource for older people.

## **6. Financial Implications**

**6.1** Net savings associated with the closure of these facilities is as follows

|                              |         |
|------------------------------|---------|
| Renton Library 2006-7 saving | £39,521 |
| Renton CEC 2006-7 saving     | £78,226 |

These budget lines have now been removed from base budget.

**6.2** On 12 April 2006 the Social Justice Committee approved the sale of Leven Cottage to Cordale Housing Association for £97,500. The sale was completed in May 2006. The running costs of Leven Cottage have generated savings over £200,000 which have been directed towards community services and staff have been transferred to other units to augment staffing levels within the Council's other residential units.

## **7. Personnel Issues**

**7.1** Staff have either been redeployed or approved for release through the Council's scheme of voluntary severance.

## **8. Conclusions**

**8.1** In light of the above, the Chief Executive is satisfied that the decisions to close the Renton Library and the Renton Community Education Centre were based on sound reasoning. The low usage levels of these facilities coupled with the proximity of alternative accommodation made them vulnerable to closure.

- 8.2** Whilst the closure of any Council provision is to be regretted, the requirement to keep the Council's revenue budget under tight control means that difficult and unpopular decisions require sometimes to be taken. The Chief Executive concludes that these decisions were correct.
- 8.3** The Chief Executive nevertheless concludes that there was a lack of opportunity for discussion of the issues and for questions to be raised and answered prior to the decisions to close being taken. Such discussion would have been unlikely to have lessened resistance to the closures, but it would have served to make clear to all interested parties the rationale on which the decisions were based.
- 8.4** The fact that a full options appraisal had not been made publicly available may have been, in part, responsible for concerns which were expressed by the Auditors. Council is however asked to note from the body of this report that the decisions to close the facilities were justified.
- 8.5** The decision to close Leven Cottage was justifiable but Audit Scotland's concerns about the governance arrangements have been recognised by the Council and the Director of Social Work Services has been asked to review the HISJ partnership model with the Director of the NHS West Dunbartonshire Community Health Council and other partners. The revised scheme of establishment will be reported to Council later in the year.

## **9. Recommendations**

### **9.1 Council is asked to approve the recommendations that:**

- (i) the closure of Renton Library, based on usage figures, the availability of alternative provision and the need to make savings within the Council's revenue budget, was justified and will stand; and**
- (ii) the closure of Renton Community Education Centre, based on usage figures, the availability of alternative provision and the need to make savings within the Council's revenue budget, was justified and will stand.**
- (iii) the closure of Leven Cottage was justifiable, however, the HISJ governance arrangements are subject to a review and will be reported to a future Council meeting.**

**David McMillan**  
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**Date: 11 January 2007**

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