

Glasgow StrifeTM

**WHAT'S THE REAL REASON FOR 62 GLASGOW
LIFE VENUES REMAINING CLOSED?**

A briefing report by The SANE Collective

JUNE 2021



NECESSITY



SOLIDARITY AGAINST NEOLIBERAL EXTREMISM

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WHY ARE SOME GLASGOW LIFE VENUES STILL CLOSED?

KEY POINTS

- The continued closure of Glasgow Life venues is a cost-cutting exercise by Glasgow City Council and is a choice, not a necessity.
- The majority of the closed venues are in areas among the 20% most deprived in Scotland. The council's own equality impact assessment of the closures found that there is potential for "displacement" of vulnerable service users, and questioned whether the closures fell afoul of the council's human rights obligations.
- The potential offloading of the venues through the People Make Glasgow Communities scheme is part of a long-term land & property strategy to reduce the council's assets to raise money for more "high quality" investments in commercialised assets like the SSE Hydro.
- Glasgow City Council is under significant financial pressure, partly due to an unfair funding settlement from the Scottish Government, as Glasgow receives the lowest per head funding of any local authority in Scotland.
- Potentially 700 full-time equivalent jobs could be lost due to the closures, with no guarantees that potential new owners - whether they be community groups or commercial operators - will keep staff on or indeed continue to run local services in the venues as before.
- There is an alternative to the council's plan: it could commit to investing in its existing assets as part of an industrial strategy to create more public-sector jobs rooted in local communities. Such an alternative strategy should be part of an alternative vision for the city which rejects the logic of neoliberal austerity.



Glasgow Life venue, The Mitchell Library

INTRODUCTION - WHAT'S THIS ALL ABOUT?

Glasgow Life runs libraries, community centres and sports facilities on behalf of Glasgow City Council, and during the pandemic lockdown in 2020/21, 101 out of 171 venues were closed for health & safety reasons. However, despite the lockdown ending, Glasgow Life made clear that in 2021/22 62 of the venues would remain closed because the “global pandemic of Covid-19 has forced significant changes to how Glasgow Life operates.”

Just four of the 62 venues are deemed unsuitable from a social distancing perspective, so the reason for their closure is not to do with health & safety restrictions. Instead, Glasgow Life - which is a wholly owned subsidiary of the council - is struggling financially. It lost a significant revenue stream (in a normal year worth £37.5 million in total) when the venues closed, and that money has not fully been made up with increased Glasgow City Council financial support, reducing Glasgow Life’s ability to finance all of its venues. Glasgow Life has claimed that “should more money become available, we would examine what further venues could be reopened”.

However, rather than searching for additional cash, the council and Glasgow Life are exploring offloading these venues permanently, through the [People Make Glasgow Communities Scheme](#).



Glasgow Life venue St Mungos Museum

WHAT IS THE PEOPLE MAKE GLASGOW COMMUNITIES (PMGC) SCHEME?

In February 2021, Glasgow City Council launched a new scheme where expressions of interest can be lodged by community groups and commercial operators in taking over council owned assets across the city through leasing or asset transfer, including the closed Glasgow Life venues.

People Make Glasgow Communities [includes a map](#) with council and Glasgow Life assets highlighted from across the city, with those interested in potentially acquiring them asked to get in touch and explain how they envisage using the building.

Applications are open to all: “any organisation, community group or commercial organisation can apply,” the website states. When submitting an application, it is possible to state that one is “interested in properties across the city”. There is nothing on the website which states that the purchase of council assets would be subject to a community asset-lock, to prevent a community centre being turned into a luxury flat, for example.

The council claims that People Make Glasgow Communities is not about off-loading council assets and services, stating that the majority of the agreements will be “leases and occupancy agreements, not asset disposals”. The council also stated that they “can” impose conditions on the leasing or asset transfer of council assets, however they would not confirm that they have so far or will in the future. As of [June 2021](#), PMGC had received 308 “expressions of interest”, 121 of those relating to Glasgow Life venues.

Out of the [62 closed Glasgow Life venues](#), two are in the process of a Community Asset Transfer (CAT), two others have had a CAT request, 17 have been “earmarked for community management through the People Make Glasgow Communities initiative”, while a further 22 have seen interest “expressed in exploring new operating models for this facility through People Make Glasgow Communities.”

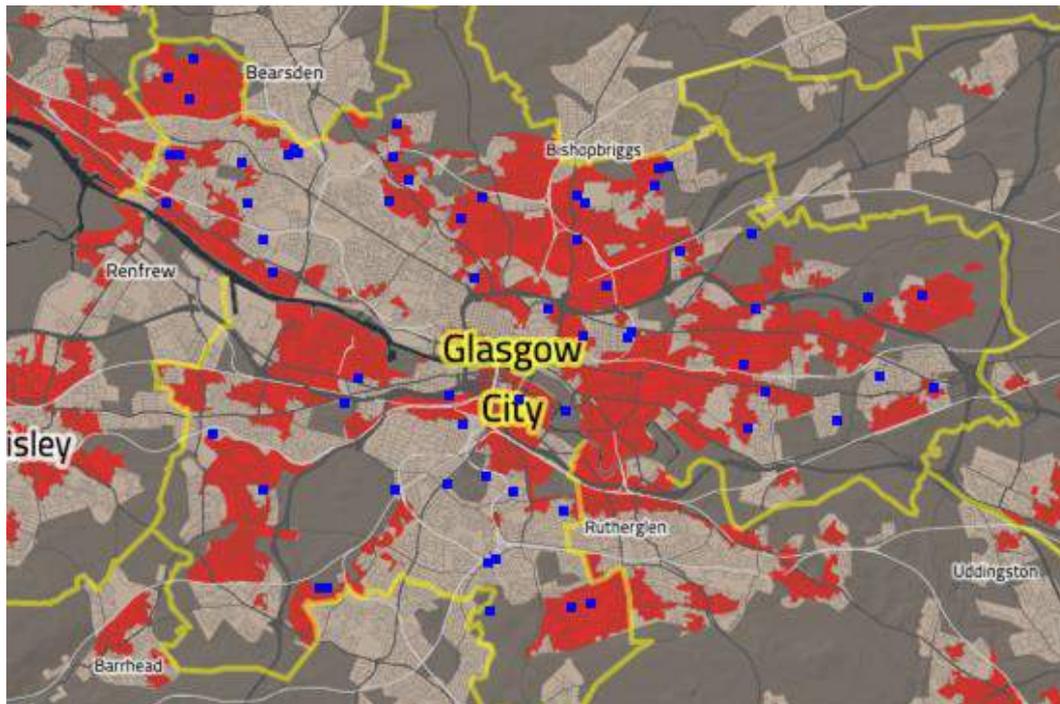
If the venues are not taken over by community groups or commercial operators, and no new funding is found, they could close permanently.



Glasgow Life venue, Gallery of Modern Art

WHAT IMPACT ARE THE CLOSURES HAVING?

Using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 2020's [interactive map](#), we have analysed the post codes of the 62 closed Glasgow Life venues, finding 31 out of 61 venues are in the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland, which is just over half (one venue, the National Hockey Centre, is in an area not rated on SIMD 2020). 19 of 61 are in the most deprived 10%, and 11 are in the most deprived 5%. Clearly, the closure of these facilities and the services provided in them is further disempowering some of the poorest residents in Glasgow.



The above map of Glasgow City highlights the closed Glasgow Life venues in blue, while the areas in red are in the 20% most deprived in Scotland. The venue closures are clearly spread out across the city, although there are notably few in the wealthier West End, while further North-West in Netherton there are three closures all within a couple of minutes walking distance of one another: the pitches & pavilion, the bowling green, and the community centre.

As part of signing off on the £4.7 million service fee cut to Glasgow Life, Glasgow City Council had to [publish](#) an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) of the risks, finding it to be rated 'High'.

“People in the city’s areas of social and economic deprivation may find that they no longer have all of the opportunities for sport, physical activity, learning, culture, and community and family services available to them locally. A number of third sector and statutory organisations, programmes and activities are located within Glasgow Life premises. There is potential for an impact for service users of displacement,” the EIA states.

The EIA goes on: "There is potential for impact on Human Rights in relation to Article 27: 'Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community'. There is also potential for impact on United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in relation to Article 31: 'Every child has the right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities.'"

There is also the not so small matter of the impact of these closures on the staff working in Glasgow Life venues. A GMB union [petition](#) against the venue closures states: "Glasgow Life's Director of Finance confirmed that rumours of up to 700 full time equivalent posts could be lost at a meeting attended by trade unions. We believe this figure could be higher. Our members have already faced intimidating messages from management regarding redeployment and job security."

Asked about the figure of 700 full-time equivalent jobs, a Glasgow Life spokesperson said it was "too early to accurately predict the future size and shape of the Glasgow Life workforce while further cost saving strategies (management of vacancies created by retirement, contracts ending or staff deciding to leave and redeployment) take effect."



'Glasgow Against Closures' campaigners gathered in Glasgow Green to protest venue cuts

WHY CAN'T THE COUNCIL FUND THESE VENUES?

Glasgow Life was established by the Council as a company limited by guarantee and registered charity in 2006, with one of the reasons stated at the time for this restructuring being that Glasgow Life could raise additional revenue streams which would not be possible if it was directly run by the council. However, despite stating that additional funds are required to re-open the venues, there has been no fundraising effort made to tap into these supposed additional revenue streams. A 2018 Glasgow Life [bulletin](#) on how it is funded states that just 1.3% of its income comes from grants and donations.

Glasgow Life (as well as the other arms-length organisations in GCC) also adds costs to the council purse, which includes highly paid executives as part of its management structure. The highest paid is Glasgow Life's chief executive, Dr Bridgette McConnell, who earned £144,315 in 2019/20, while 29 other staff at Glasgow Life earned £60,000 or over, according to the [annual accounts](#). This bureaucracy would not be required if Glasgow Life was run directly by the council, rather than as an arms-length organisation.

Glasgow City Council's 2021/22 budget agreed a service fee cut to Glasgow Life of £4.7 million (6%), reducing the service fee - the amount the council contributes to delivering Glasgow Life's services - to £72.8 million. The council has agreed with Glasgow Life that over the next four years it will provide a minimum guaranteed income of £100 million, made up of the service fee plus any shortfall if Glasgow Life is unable to achieve its new target of raising £27.2 million per year in earned income. This £100 million of funding is below the £117 million which is required to open all of Glasgow Life's venues, hence why the venues which have not been selected for re-opening will remain closed.

Importantly, Glasgow Life has made it clear that it's absolute priority now is to meet its target of raising its earned income, and that aim comes before reopening all of its venues, stating [in a briefing](#) to Glasgow councillors: "It has been agreed with Glasgow City Council that prior to any further venues and services being considered for re-opening, the focus over the next few years is to generate earned income of £27.2 million to remove the ongoing financial burden to the Council."

To be clear, what this means is that even if Glasgow Life were to meet this target in 2021/22 (in fact, it only aims to raise earned income of £6.4 million over the next financial year), the 62 closed venues would still not re-open, since this would only go towards the £100 million guaranteed budget, and thus would free up money for Glasgow City Council to spend elsewhere. The obvious conclusion to draw is that Glasgow Life's budget has been shrunk permanently, and the closed venues will only be reopened if a PMGC leasing or asset transfer is agreed.

Furthermore, we can safely imply from Glasgow Life's new "focus" on earned income that the choice of the 62 venues which remain closed is entirely financially driven: they are not earning money for Glasgow Life, and may well be costing it money, regardless of its importance as a local public service.

The council did not have to reduce the service fee by £4.7 million and set a £100 million cap on funding for the next four years; this was a choice. For example, the council's 2021/22 budget also included £6.5 million to "new investment and resource redirection". Total GCC services

expenditure increased for the year by £45.6 million, with a 3% increase in the Scottish Government's grant to the council for 2021/22.

That is not to say that GCC does not face real financial pressures, including: rising costs of Education and Social Work (which collectively make up over 70% of council spending); a growth in "protected" areas of spending dedicated to Scottish Government priorities (reducing the amount of money available for other spending); constrained Scottish Government support over the long-term, with GCC having the lowest per head funding of any council in Scotland between 2013-14 and 2019-20; an inability to change local taxation policy which raises too much revenue from the poorest in the city and not enough from the wealthiest and big business; and the long-run impact of servicing GCC's £1.5 billion debt, which cost 52% of council tax revenue in 2019/20.

Despite all this, it is clear that not only have Glasgow City Council chosen not to prioritise Glasgow Life venues following the pandemic, but that these closures are in fact part of a longer-term strategy that stretches back to well before Covid-19, as the 2019 GCC document ['Property and Land Strategy 2019-2029'](#) proves.



Glasgow Life venue Kelvingrove Museum

WHAT IS THE COUNCIL'S PROPERTY AND LAND STRATEGY?

The Property and Land Strategy, which was passed by councillors in April 2019, finds that the council has over 1,000 buildings, with an operating cost per annum of £130 million. It identifies £200 million in new investments in property and assets it would like to make, and “a surplus portfolio of property and land” that it would like to get rid of.

The document states that the council's strategic focus is on “delivering services from a reduced number of locations”, enabling the council “to reduce its operating costs, realise capital receipts and invest in fewer high quality facilities.” The aim is to create a “smaller” more “agile” council estate, with the sale of land contributing to a “potential unlocking of regeneration and redevelopment opportunities for the private sector”.

The council has claimed there is “no connection” between the Property and Land Strategy document and the People Make Glasgow Communities initiative, but the PMGC [website states](#) explicitly that: “As part of Glasgow City Council's Property and Land Strategy, the Council (including Glasgow Life) is looking at new ways of operating its current directly-managed estate.” The connection is therefore very clear.

The council's desire to off-load assets deemed costly and invest in more commercial-focused assets is a typical neoliberal approach that we have seen across the UK over the past decade, where public land has been sold [at an unprecedented rate](#). It seeks to build on the 12,000 seater SSE Hydro, built in 2013 at council-majority owned Scottish Event Campus (SEC), costing £125 million. Before the pandemic, the Hydro helped SEC take in a record turnover in 2018-19.

However, the pandemic has highlighted the dangers of a land and property strategy which seeks to focus on big commercial successes at the expense of small community facilities. If something goes wrong, the negative effect is magnified. Not one of the Glasgow Life community facilities is running at a loss anything like that of the Hydro since the pandemic struck.

It may be difficult - if not impossible - to get the Hydro, which is an international events arena, back to its previous numbers of attendees even when the threat from Covid-19 is completely eliminated. But it is not the Hydro which is being let go by the council on the back of the pandemic, it is the likes of Whiteinch Library, Easterhouse Sports Centre and Ruchill Community Centre.



Glasgow's SSE Hydro

IS THERE AN ALTERNATIVE TO GLASGOW CITY COUNCIL'S PLAN?

Yes! Instead of offloading vital local services to community groups and the private sector to free-up cash for spending on high-profile projects, the council could focus its investment on improving the existing assets which it already has, making them the centre of a new industrial strategy aimed at maximising council land to create decent public-sector jobs rooted in local communities.

This would help empower local communities in Glasgow, far more than offloading assets onto them, which they will struggle to properly finance. Communities should be empowered to participate democratically in well-run, publicly delivered services, not pressured to take over the full operational costs of venues in fear of local facilities shutting permanently if they do not.

Changes are also undoubtedly required at the Scottish Government level too, by increasing funding for Glasgow City Council and overhauling local taxation so that a progressive and fair system can replace the Council Tax and Non-Domestic Rates. Further, Glasgow Life services should be run directly by the council, rather than via an arms-length organisation which appears to add little except additional costs.

Ultimately, what Glasgow City Council needs is a People's Plan for the city; a new vision for the city developed by and for Glasgow's residents. That's why SANE has initiated the People's Plan for Glasgow project. The People's Plan for Glasgow is a collaboration of organisations, campaigns and individuals to co-create an alternative plan for people and the city. It is a 'Humanifesto' which rejects the current market based, corporate perspective that fails to offer many citizens wellbeing in any form. The People's Plan seeks to grow from the amazing work already being done locally on issues such as housing, migrant justice, transport, city planning, equality, sustainability, health and economy. Members are working to build a strong alternative platform and explore ideas for a revitalised local democracy which promotes ecological and social justice, to create a Glasgow that works for people, the planet and future generations.



Glasgow Life venue, The Winter Gardens at the People's Palace