

REPORT TO: EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 15 January 2018

Report of: Director of Place

Title: Proposed Consultation on Public Conveniences

Is this a Key Decision?

No

Is this an Executive or Council Function?

Executive

1. What is the report about?

The report requests permission to start a public consultation on the proposals to close a number of public conveniences to achieve the required budget savings and enable a balanced budget to be set.

2. Recommendations:

2.1 That the Executive Committee support the decision to start a public consultation on the closure of public conveniences as detailed in appendix 1.

3. Reasons for the recommendation:

3.1 In common with many cities around the UK, our public toilets no longer serve the needs of residents and are costly to maintain. Many are hidden away and are in poor condition. They attract serious and repeated anti-social behaviour including widespread drug use and are regularly vandalised. Understandably many are infrequently used.

3.2 Further central government funding reductions mean that the City Council has to find an additional saving of £3.9 million over the next two financial years. Every service is being challenged to ensure that it provides value for money and all non-statutory services are under considerable pressure. Public conveniences are not a statutory service and we no longer have enough funding to maintain all the sites we operate.

3.3 We operate 26 public conveniences across the City Council area, with two of those currently closed due to anti-social behaviour. This report seeks approval to consult on proposals to rationalise our existing provision to a more manageable number and suggests alternative proposals to improve the availability of good quality publically accessible toilets.

4. What are the resource implications including non financial resources.

4.1 There are no resource implications for the consultation which will be completed in partnership with our Communication, Tourism and Culture Team.

5. Section 151 Officer comments:

5.1 There are no financial implications arising from running the consultation. This option however, forms part of the overall budget proposals for 2019-20 and were it not to proceed, would require alternative reductions to the budget to be identified.

6. What are the legal aspects?

6.1 Local authorities are under no statutory obligation to provide public conveniences; it is at the discretion of the authority, who may charge such fees for the use of any such convenience as is deemed fit. (S.87 Public Health Act 1936).

7. Monitoring Officer's comments:

Given that the authority is being sought to consult on proposals to rationalise our existing provision to a more manageable number, this report raises no issues of concern to the Monitoring Officer.

8. Report details:

8.1 Background

We operate 26 public conveniences across the City Council area, with two of those currently closed due to anti-social behaviour. Many were built a long time ago and are hidden away, in the wrong location and in poor condition. They attract serious and repeated anti-social behaviour including widespread drug use and are regularly vandalised. In short they are not nice places to use especially compared to the large number of good quality, publically accessible toilets, provided by our shops, cafes or shopping centres. Consequently some are rarely used for legitimate purposes.

8.2 Provision of public toilets is not a statutory responsibility for the Council and many authorities around the country have been reviewing their provision in light of continuing budget reductions. A report by the BBC earlier in the year noted;

- At least 1,782 facilities have closed across the UK in the last decade,
- Ten areas, including Newcastle, Merthyr Tydfil in south Wales and Wandsworth in south London, now have no council-run public toilets at all,

8.3 Many councils have introduced charging for public toilets with mixed results. Nationally it is estimated that it costs councils over £100million to run toilets while earning only £4.5million in income.

8.4 Continued central government funding reductions are putting increased pressure on public services throughout the UK. On top of several years of budget cuts, the City Council has to find an additional £3.9 million over the next two years. All services must therefore ensure that they are delivering maximum value for money.

8.5 As part of the drive to reduce costs, we are continuously looking at efficiency savings, but in some cases efficiencies alone are insufficient to address the problem. Public Realm is one of the largest service areas with a large budget. This is understandable as many of the front line services are included in this service. Where practically possible in recent years we have sought to protect the budgets of Public Realm, and indeed, last year we increased the budget to provide resources to address the problems of Graffiti and Tagging. The obvious areas to examine for reducing budgets are discretionary services, and therefore managers have been asked to justify their

budgets with graffiti removal, CCTV and public conveniences being examples of areas examined in greater detail. The additional resources that have been put into Graffiti removal illustrate the impact tagging is having on the built environment. CCTV is considered to be important to the safety of residents. Even though one may argue this should be a matter for the police and crime commissioner it is recognised as an important amenity to reassure our residents and businesses, as well as being an extremely useful measure to support the police. In examining our services in some detail the process recognised concerns over the condition, lack of use and abuse of our public conveniences. Managers recommend rationalisation of our stock and that alternative ways of delivering a service be investigated. The current distribution of public conveniences owe much to an historical legacy that do not necessarily reflect current demands and alternative provision. It is often the case that removing something is more keenly felt than the benefit arising from a new installation, and we have over the years avoided removing facilities. But this is no longer sustainable, many of the public conveniences would require significant investment to bring them up an acceptable condition but austerity has eroded our resource base and, in spite of the claims austerity has ended, the reality is that for local government it has not, nor is there any good news over the horizon.

8.6 Alternative provision

With severely reduced budgets we need to consider alternative ways to provide a service. Many other local authorities have been through a similar process and in January this year Bristol City Council closed all on street public toilets across the city. This resulted in the closure of 18 public conveniences and 13 remaining open mainly in parks and sporting facilities. To fill the gap they introduced a community toilet scheme.

8.7 A community toilet scheme is where local businesses sign up to an advertised scheme whereby they allow their toilets to be used by the general public. The benefits to businesses are increased publicity for their business and increased footfall. The Bristol scheme places business who sign up, onto an online interactive map of the City, together with a printed community toilet scheme map available for tourists, visitors and residents to the city. Bristol currently has 32 business signed up to the scheme which has resulted in increased availability of better quality publically accessible toilets. We propose to look at the feasibility of a community toilet scheme to mitigate against the closure of the 13 public conveniences outlined in the report. This will form part of the consultation exercise.

8.8 A link to the Bristol toilet scheme is included here:

<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/business-support-advice/join-the-community-toilet-scheme>

8.9 Proposed closures

The list of proposed closures is included in appendix 1 and totals 13 facilities in addition to two which have been closed since 2016. This would leave 11 open across the City, mainly in parks, sporting facilities and tourist areas. This compares favourably to Bristol which is a city nearly four times the population of Exeter.

9. Human Resources considerations

9.1 Apart from officer time, none from the consultation process.

10. How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan?

11.1 The consultation will inform the review of public conveniences and help towards our priority of providing value for money services.

12. What risks are there and how can they be reduced?

12.1 A risk register is included as appendix 2.

15. What is the impact of the decision on equality and diversity; health and wellbeing; safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults, community safety and the environment?

15.1 The decision to consult will have no impact but will allow a wide cross section of our population to have their say on the issue. We will examine ways to mitigate the impact of the possible closures such as the potential for a community toilet scheme, as part of the consultation exercise.

16. Are there any other options?

16.1 Each individual location may have options for redevelopment which could incorporate new publically accessible toilets or there may be local community groups interested in their operation. All 13 are proposed to be closed to achieve the required savings and such investigations may be considered afterwards with a suitable business case.

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:-

None

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Appendix 1: Proposed closures

Location	Close Y / N	General comments
Cathedral & Quay Car Park	Y	Closed in 2016 due to repeated anti-social behaviour
Guinea Street	Y	Closed in 2016 due to vandalism, heavy drug use and repeated anti-social behaviour.
Blackboy Road	Y	Heavily used for drugs, constant vandalism to baby change area but relatively new. ASB issues constantly as it's on the boundary of the no alcohol limit and Police in regular attendance.
Buddle Lane	Y	Poor location and so rarely used, replacement roof required, access not compliant with current regulations for disabled people
Cowick Barton Playing fields	N	Heavily vandalised but used by sports activities, and no other nearby provision. Review as part of the physical activity strategy.
Cowick Lane	Y	Poorly located and so little used but regular graffiti and vandalism.
Cowick Street	Y	Under the railway arch, awful condition, drainage problems, regular vandalism and extensive ASB.
Ennerdale Way	Y	Mainly used at weekends for recreation but was not transferred to Exeter College. High levels of drug use through the week and vandalism.
Exeter Quay	N	Roof constantly leaks, hand wash facilities poor but very well used by traders / visitors etc. It serves a major tourist area but is of poor quality and requires a significant refurbishment when funds are available.
Exwick Cemetery (In mess room)	N	Part of staff mess room and used by funerals.
Fore Street Heavitree	Y	Regular ASB Issues including drug use and vandalism due to poor design.
Fore Street Topsham	Y	Needs extensive refurbishment with a pungent smell which is impossible to get rid of but still well used. Topsham has 3 toilets at present but the only disabled toilet is here.
Hamlin Lane	Y	Long history of Anti-Social Behaviour and repeat fly tipping. Used by small number of refuse teams and parks staff.
Heavitree Park	N	Next to sport & leisure activities and well used in spring / summer. Should be considered as part of proposals for a community building / café.
Higher Cemetery	Y	Rarely used by anyone but location and infrequent use means that it's vulnerable to misuse.
Honiton P&R	N	Commuter facilities. Potential to divest to DCC but considered unlikely
King George V Playing Fields	N	Next to leisure & sport facilities. Review as part of the physical activity strategy.
King William Street	Y	Heavy drugs use & vandalised regularly causing issues to Citizens advice offices.
Matford Park & Ride	N	Commuter facilities. Potential to divest to DCC but considered unlikely.

Musgrave Row	Y	Awful smell, very poor condition, oppressive blue lighting due to constant drug use. Kept open overnight on Friday's & Saturdays as a trial.
Okehampton Street	Y	Heavily used for drugs and extensive ASB issues, no designated ladies it's shared with disabled
Paris Street	N	Very busy with visitors and commuters, continue to operate until new facilities open.
Pinhoe Road, Whipton	Y	Poor condition and constantly vandalised but is at least in a good location near shops.
St Thomas Park	N	Next to leisure & sport facilities. Suffers from vandalism and drug use, requires upgrading. Review as part of the physical activity strategy.
Topsham Cemetery	N	Cemetery toilet, not used much but offers little in the way of a saving
Topsham Quay	N	Needs updating, but is used heavily by tourists and visitors to Topsham.

Appendix 2: Risk Register

No.	Risk (Threat to achieving the goals of the project)	Risk Mitigation Measures
1	Failure of businesses / community organisations to get involved with the community toilet scheme.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We will utilise the marketing skills of our own Communication, Tourism and Culture team to make the project appealing to businesses and to emphasise the benefits to them. 2. We will utilise our contacts to approach as many suitable businesses in the City as possible. Some of these already offer their facilities to the public and some have expressed interest when the bus station toilets were proposed to close. 3. We will work with the BID to promote the scheme to their members.
2	People not knowing where the nearest publically accessible toilet is in the City	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We will either produce a separate map with publically accessible toilets and community toilet scheme members on it or integrate it into our existing tourist maps of the city. 2. We will produce an interactive map on our website which will show locations, information on what to expect and provide directions to the nearest facility. 3. We will work with older peoples groups and forums, equalities groups and forums as widely as possible. 4. By working with the Communication, Tourism and Culture team we will ensure that we liaise with the RAMM, Underground passages and other key tourist locations. 5. Those participating in the scheme will have a sign outside their premises indicating exactly what provision is available. 6. Reconfigure street directional signs to match the changes. 7. Signposting on closed facilities directing them to the nearest suitable alternative.
3	The closure of some sites may take place before alternative provision is available.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There is already a large provision of publically accessible toilets within the City Centre in shops, shopping centres, bars and cafes. Large numbers of shoppers and visitors already favour these facilities over our own. 2. Focussing on those who already have publically accessible toilets and targeting their early sign up will give good coverage across the city. 3. Signposting on closed facilities and quick updating of online resources once businesses have signed up. 4. In areas where alternative provision is going to be a problem consider community asset transfer.