

INTERVIEW PANELS

The group held two panel sessions in 2011; the first panel interviewed professional people and an acknowledged expert in the field of public toilet provision, whilst the second panel interviewed representatives of certain equality contact groups.

At the first meeting of 14 July 2011, three invitees with a professional perspective attended to give the Working Group their views on the relative need of public toilets and the considerations warranted should the current Council public toilet provision be altered in conjunction with the introduction of a Community Toilet Scheme. The invitees were:

- John Harvey – City Centre Manager
- Andrew McNeilly – Manager, Guildhall Shopping Centre
- Professor Clara Greed – University of the West of England

Minutes of the meeting are attached, but in summary the following key points emerged:

- a) public toilet provision within Exeter is fairly good when compared with other local authorities, although we are not in the 'top league';
- b) when taking into account both Council provision and public provision within retail areas such as large department stores or shopping centres, the city centre has good provision during the retail day, but lacks sufficient provision in the evening for non-patrons of restaurants and public houses;
- c) quality of provision is extremely important in terms of customer expectation and the quality of the Council provision within the city centre is sometimes not maintained to a good enough standard;
- d) businesses would benefit from good provision of high quality toilets, as the visitor experience to the city centre would be enhanced if first class toilets were provided;
- e) public toilets are very important for visitors to an area, particularly at transport termini (bus stations, train stations and car-parks), and within destination centres (retail and tourist), and lack of provision can strongly deter many groups of the population from visiting, whereas poor quality can mar the experience of a visit, deter any return and undermine the reputation of a destination;
- f) good provision of accessible public toilets is extremely important to certain groups of the community such as the elderly, mothers with young children, children, those with a mobility disability, and those suffering from incontinence and conditions such as colitis and Crohn's disease;
- g) the need for a community toilet scheme within the city centre when considered against current provision from the Council and private provision open to the public, is not demonstrated, but in terms of supplementing provision in outlying district shopping areas, it could be particularly beneficial;

- h) within city centre restaurants it was unlikely that there would be enthusiasm for joining a community toilet scheme as this would most likely detract from the dining experience of customers;
- i) introducing a community toilet scheme should not be a reason for reducing local authority provision, as fluctuations and withdrawals from a community toilet scheme could easily undermine future public toilet provision, with all the consequential impacts;
- j) there were many unanswered questions about the viability of community toilet schemes, (eg liability, insurance, sign-posting, 'exclusion' to certain parts of the community), and these had to be addressed or understood before embarking on such a scheme;
- k) public toilet provision does not have the important profile it should have in terms of strategic planning and how it links with and influences visitor dynamics and experience of a place, or how it encourages beneficial use of parks and open spaces;
- l) many local authorities view public toilet provision as an expensive problem they would like to get rid of, but fail to realise the benefits to the community and to businesses that good quality public toilet provision can make – Britain is now seen as poor provider in international terms, and falls behind much higher standards found in many European countries and the far East.

At the second meeting of 2 December 2011, five invitees attended to give a user's view from but from the perspective of specific parts of the community; those attending were:

- Yvonne Pope - Living Options
- Laura Robinson and Pauline Haggarty – Sure Start
- Martyn Rogers – Age UK
- Linda Regan – Fawcett Devon

Minutes of the meeting are attached, but in summary the following key points emerged:

- a) public toilet provision was seen as important and any reduction in toilet provision would not be supported;
- b) a community toilet scheme would be perceived as beneficial if it supplemented the current provision, but not if it was introduced as a replacement for such;
- c) the more that good quality toilets became widely available the more the confidence of the disabled and elderly in visiting the city centre grew;
- d) many businesses already offered use of their toilets for the public, some still lacked disabled adaptations;
- e) some disabled toilets had simple deficiencies that deterred use (e.g. placing of the flush handle on the wrong side of the cistern, making it difficult to flush);
- f) signage was important, as was sufficient space in the toilet for those with physical constraints – a comprehensive plan of private and Council toilet provision was not available, and would be extremely helpful;

- g) there was concern that and businesses entering a community toilet scheme may later withdraw their support, and reduce the overall provision to users, therefore there was a risk which could be difficult to manage;
- h) there were concerns about the location of toilets within premises that may join a scheme – often these were at the back of premises and sometimes on other floors, and consequently were not easily accessible to people, particularly the disabled, those with mobility problems and those with push-chairs and young children;
- i) it was important that any public toilet was easily identifiable and easily accessible to the users - users would be embarrassed if having to ask for assistance within a premises and draw attention to themselves;
- j) few private premises made provision for nappy-changing facilities, a community toilet scheme would therefore struggle to cater for this need;
- k) in general terms the provision of public toilets in Exeter was good, but cleanliness could improve, and there were problems with undesirable individuals misusing the toilets in some (e.g. drug use), which deterred general users;
- l) many would be happy to pay a small admission fee so long as standards of cleanliness, etc., were high and maintained that way – charging was strongly associated with improved standards;
- m) toilets with turnstiles were an impediment, particularly to those with mobility problems or pushchairs;
- n) there was an imbalance in public toilet provision in Exeter (as with most local authorities), and the ideal ratio of 2 to 1 in favour of women was not met;
- o) even a fully operational community toilet scheme only functioned during trading hours and accessing pub toilets was not popular with women, many feeling uncomfortable in entering alone solely to use the toilets.

The then Head of Environmental Health Service was invited by the Rev. Iain McDonald, the representative of the Interfaith Group, to a meeting of the Group on Tuesday 6 December 2011 in the Fore Street Church. Many of the above views were echoed by this group, which included many representatives from a wide range of faiths, but with the following additions:

- a) a number of people of certain faiths would not enter premises selling alcohol in order to use a toilet;
- b) some women of certain faiths would be deterred from entering any male-dominated premises in order to access a toilet, or a unisex toilet.