

FINDINGS FROM OXFORD CITY COUNCIL VISIT

A fact-finding visit to Oxford City Council was made to meet with the co-ordinator of Oxford's community toilet scheme, the Street Scene Manager and Portfolio Holder. The purpose of this visit was to learn about the mechanics of setting up and operating a scheme and to examine the real benefits and issues that such a scheme may generate. The group visited a number of premises participating in the scheme, allowing the opportunity to question participating businesses for their views. In addition several of the city centre public toilets were viewed to compare Oxford City Council's public toilet provision with Exeter.

The fact-finding group was made up of the following people:

- Cllr. K. Mitchell (Chair of Working Group);
- Cllr. S. Hobden;
- Cllr. C. Thompson;
- Cllr. R. Branston;
- R. Norley, Assistant Director Environment;
- L. Harvey, Cleansing Operations Manager;
- C. Daish, Cleansing Supervisor.

Prior to the visit, each group member received Oxford City Council documentation on public toilet provision, which included a report on recent and proposed investment for upgrading provision, and details of public toilet provision in Oxford (both public toilets provided by the Council and those provided by the community toilet scheme).

This visit proved to be a valuable exercise, with much being learnt from the opportunity to hold face-to-face discussions with officers, the Portfolio Holder and managers of participating businesses.

Oxford City Council is a second tier authority, predominantly urban in character with a large university and historical buildings at its centre. It has 24 public toilets throughout its area, which matches Exeter's provision of 26 public toilets. It is complemented by 9 community toilets provided by participating businesses. The community toilets are all within the city centre, and include individual businesses (e.g. 'The Jam Factory' which is one of 3 cafés participating, and 'The Kings Arms' which is one of 4 public houses/clubs participating), and the national chains of Pizza Hut and Marks & Spencer.

It was apparent that Oxford operated a model that was distinctly different from other models across the country in that there was no contractual relationship between the City Council and participating businesses; instead there was a mutually beneficial relationship where both parties saw merit in working together in extending toilet provision to the wider public and not just confining provision to patrons of a particular establishment.

Key advantages of scheme

Oxford City Council developed an unique model that consciously moved away from other models that provided annual funding from the local authority to the business; instead it looked at persuading businesses to join a scheme by offering positive publicity and profile as the main 'selling point' (e.g. in the Council's own newspaper to residents, press releases and listing of the business in Council produced street maps). This positive publicity is particularly attractive to smaller local businesses as it can serve to attract new customers, but it also beneficial to larger companies that wish to demonstrate a commitment to their local communities.

This approach holds three highly attractive elements in respect of operating this type of community toilet scheme:

- there is no ongoing revenue commitment to participants in a scheme (typically a minimum of £600 per annum, per business);
- because there is no public money exchanged, there is no need for a formal contract specifying standards that are required to be adhered to, removing the need to provide resources for contract specification monitoring and complaint handling; and
- as the relationship is a loose one, rather than a formal contract, the Council has little if no liability in respect of the business premises other than that which it would normally have as a regulator (i.e. it is in no part the provider of the toilet service).

The scheme has carried over all but one premises in to the second year of operation, (the one premises dropping out after a change of management), demonstrating a good degree of sustainability in the scheme compared to other schemes.

Oxford City Council advised that there have been very few complaints from the public about standards within participating businesses. In part this may be explained by an understanding that complaints are handled by the businesses themselves, and customers are not encouraged to complain to the Council in the first instance. It is also highly relevant that a large amount of businesses were initially contacted and only a relatively small number were willing to participate; in effect the most appropriate premises self-selected themselves. However, in interviewing businesses it was also clear that management and staff supported the scheme, and understood that good standards led to good business.

The operation of the scheme costs relatively little to administer and support. The revenue costs of the scheme stem from:

- premises signage – this consists of ‘soft signage’, basically a distinctively branded badge in the form of a window sticker. No ‘hard signage’ is used (i.e. street signs) because this is costly and impractical should a business withdraw from the scheme;
- limited officer support – liaison is maintained with participants by an officer, but this is a small and peripheral part of her main function;
- publicity and publications – this is low cost, with a reliance on the Council’s own newsletter publication and press releases, and inclusion in existing documentation/publications (street maps, web-site, etc.).

Conclusion

Although the Oxford scheme has much to commend it once partners have been engaged, there was significant development work undertaken to engage those partners. Officers estimated that in trying to persuade businesses to engage, the absence of a financial incentive was a key deterrent, leading to many non-productive contacts with businesses (with a success rate of around 3%). This preliminary contact work was resource intensive, with a dedicated officer spending approximately 6 months developing the scheme and engaging partners.

It is likely that the task of engaging partner businesses in Exeter could be eased by learning from the experience of Oxford, and targeting the types of businesses that were more willing to partner. Oxford City Council has advised that it would be willing to offer further advice to the Council, should a similar scheme be introduced in Exeter.