

COMMUNITY TOILETS WORKING GROUP

Thursday 14 July 2011

Present:-

Councillors Mitchell (Chair), Branston, Hobden and Thompson

Also Present

Head of Environmental Health Services, Cleansing Operations Manager and Member Services Officer (HB)

In attendance

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

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APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE

This was received from Mike Trim.

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MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 17 JUNE 2011

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 June 2011 were agreed as a correct record.

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CITY CENTRE BUSINESSES

The Chair welcomed Andrew McNeilly, Asset Manager, Aviva Guildhall Centre and Vice Chair of the Chamber of Commerce and John Harvey, City Centre Manager.

John Harvey

John Harvey spoke on toilet provision in the City Centre and the position of the business community. He reported that the St Catherine's Street toilets, built as part of the Princesshay development and therefore the most modern, were the most popular reflecting the fact that the public preferred to use toilets of the highest standards and cleanliness. He referred to the existing larger stores such as M&S, Dingles and Debenhams where toilets were well used by the public effectively providing an unofficial "community" use and suggested that, with the forthcoming addition of John Lewis at Home, the City Centre was well catered for in terms of private premises. He listed the new restaurants in the City Centre - Coal, Strada, La Tosca, Carlucci's and Giraffe - all of which provided toilets for their clients but who would be unlikely to join any scheme on the basis that their customers would feel that allowing the public to use the toilets would detract from the dining experience. The other obvious alternative of using pub toilets was often only an option for single males.

Given existing use of store toilets by the public, there could be scope for further retail outlets, cafes, restaurants etc. to also open their facilities but he suggested that, based on his links with City Centre store etc. managers, whilst a partnership approach to community toilet provision could be of real benefit to individual businesses in other areas of the City, it was generally felt that little added value

could be achieved by incorporating City Centre stores in any scheme. Further, it was not felt that the schemes introduced in other Cities could be replicated in respect of the City Centre.

A Member, referring to the Pinhoe area, advised that some businesses in this area would be amenable to providing toilets which could be used by the public with City Council backing. Another Member urged caution with regard to local authority assistance to private enterprises.

Responding to a Member, the City Centre Manager stated that businesses did not feel that the City Centre was lacking in public toilet provision generally but that consideration could be given to late opening of existing facilities, especially if trading hours were extended further into the evening. The Business Improvement District Bid included a proposal for further extending Christmas opening hours and, in the event of this occurring, an integral feature would be partnership working with the City Council which could include a review of toilet opening hours.

The Chair, supporting the view that outlying districts could benefit from a Community Toilet Scheme, asked why, given that outlets such as Macdonalds, Burger King and KFC were used by the general public, the City Centre's other restaurants could not do the same. He also asked how, given the doubts expressed by the business community, both the Richmond and Oxford schemes were apparently successful.

The City Centre Manager stated that City Centre restaurants offered a different dining experience with customers usually staying on the premises for 45-60 minutes plus, whereas Macdonalds etc. were fast food outlets/takeaways and were patronised in greater numbers by a younger demographic. Andrew McNeilly remarked that prices were far greater in the former and that these businesses would suffer if their customers felt that they did not receive value for money as a result of the general public's use of in-house toilets.

Although believing that local, smaller businesses in the suburbs could benefit from a Community Toilet Scheme, a Member felt that introducing a scheme for the City Centre could place unnecessary budgetary demands on the City Council and that difficulties could result should private businesses withdraw from any scheme. Another Member asked for further information on the operation of the scheme in Oxford, a City similar in nature to Exeter, and remarked that Richmond, which he knew well, differed to Exeter, in that its one unattractive under-ground toilet had acted as one of the catalysts for introducing a Community Toilet scheme but that the retail area there was largely confined to a single High Street and therefore differed from Exeter.

Another Member, with reference to the Group's remit, felt that greater regard be given to the bigger picture and that it was inappropriate therefore to rule any scheme out at this early stage. As the first step in a more positive approach, research on the level of demand was required and she also suggested involving groups/support networks for those with health related issues such as Crohn's and Colitis. The Head of Environmental Health Services advised that any research would be resource intensive although usage levels could also be obtained from assessing utilities and consumables consumption.

The Cleansing Services Manager confirmed that the presence of an attendant, as at the Paris Street Bus Station toilet, where problems could be severe, were of value in deterring misuse. These and the King William Street, Musgrave Row and Blackboy Road toilets were well used, Guinea Street toilet, less well so, the Manager referring to a recent incident experienced there. She referred to the need

for double locking of radar operated doors as some individuals possessed radar keys. She acknowledged that public misuse including drug-taking, anti social behaviour and rough sleeping would not be tolerated in private stores and that fear of such activity could be a major sticking point. She referred to the need for attention to be given to the fabric of some public toilets but stressed that the standard of cleanliness was generally high.

It was confirmed that there were now a greater number of private toilets available in the Princesshay area following the re-development.

Andrew McNeilly

Mr McNeilly felt that, in principle, a suitable Community Toilet Scheme could be good for businesses but expressed certain caveats.

Referring to the City Council review of toilets in 2010, he urged caution that any introduction of a Community Toilet Scheme should not be for the reason of reducing local authority responsibility in this matter. Introducing such a scheme could lead to an initial increase in toilet numbers but then losses below the original provision could result if businesses withdrew. He felt that if there had been a business case for such a scheme it would already have been pursued by the private sector. Although there was an issue with evening time provision he felt that the overall provision in the City Centre was very good but suggested that the introduction of a scheme to outlying suburban areas, including existing shopping centres, could be of benefit.

Ultimately, it would be for individual businesses to decide if they wished to participate. The different size and demographic of customers would have an impact and regard would need to be had to building capacity, for example, provision for the disabled. Insurance, health and safety, marketing, staffing and maintenance were all factors although funding through a partnership approach and/or sponsorship could be investigated. He also suggested funding could be obtained if the Business Improvement District bid succeeded. Charging should also be considered.

He recognised that the overall retail/entertainment experience of a City Centre would be enhanced if first class toilet facilities were available and would also be of advantage to those with medical problems. Visitors, shoppers and tourists would all benefit. Car parks and toilets were often the first port of call and good facilities would be noted and approved of, lead to further visits and boost the economy. Businesses would benefit from the overall improvement in personal services. Quality, as well as quantity, were important as was the provision of as wide a choice as possible for the public.

A Member referred to the importance of meeting the needs of the disabled. It was noted that Exeter did not suffer from severe problems of vandalism, as experienced in some areas, but that regard should be had to its role as a tourist venue with large numbers of people alighting from coaches.

The Head of Environmental Health Services, in response to a Member, advised that consultation had not been undertaken with the private sector in 2010 because of the resource implications. Consultation would be an inherent part of any future plans and the Chamber would play a significant role in this respect.

PROFESSOR CLARA GREED OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST OF ENGLAND

The Chair welcomed Professor Greed who spoke on her circulated paper on public toilet provision and to her power-point presentation – Lack of Public Toilet Provision - An Inconvenient Truth.

The following points were made during the course of the presentation:-

- Toilet provision was not mandatory under the Public Health Act 1936 Act. Victorian engineers had more regard to linkage with public sewers than public accessibility;
- Some local authorities had undertake wholesale public toilet closures with little regard to a sustainable provision strategy - the last 10 years had witnessed the closure of 40% of toilets;
- Local authorities might operate more as facilitators than providers in the future - could offer rate relief, local authority cleaners, help with insurance where businesses sought to provide toilet facilities;
- Wider spatial strategy required for planning toilet provision - covers a wide area - transport, leisure centres etc.
- Regard to be had to women, mothers with children, elderly, disabled, wheelchairs users;
- Community toilet schemes often not open at the time people want toilets, for example in the morning rush hour period;
- Often, attendants and CCTV saved money in the long term;
- Unisex toilets often not a great success but introduced with view to removing queues for female toilets;
- Need in suburbs due to postmen, mobile libraries, meals on wheels, school children, “white van man”, people in parks, local shopping centres;
- Toilet facilities at bus and train stations also need to be considered;
- Public use of pub toilets – not attractive to women, children;
- World Toilet Organisation – great provision in Far East such as Japan and China with street maps of toilets on bins, New York – Bathrooms mean Business and Potty Parity to ensue equal parity of provision for women. Belgium and Holland - right to use any pub/café toilets but not in France any longer;
- World Toilet Association – view that toilets not a priority in the UK and any public perception of facilities being dirty and run down could be a disincentive to visit
- Association of Town Centre Managers state that retail turnover is higher where high quality toilets are available;
- BS6465 is under review by the Sanitary Installations Committee covering public toilets, offices, schools, factories etc.;
- Charging - Westminster City Council and Cambridge City Council charge to fund provision and other mechanisms such as business rates and Section 106 agreements could be examined;
- Public Sector Equality Duty - e.g. equal charges for men and women;
- Key approach - Survey - Analysis - Plan; and

She responding as follows to Members queries:-

- Some local authorities include specially worded sections in Supplementary Planning Guidance to facilitate support for toilet provision;
- Localism Bill - seeks to empower local communities to run own facilities and may impact on toilet provision;
- Cambridgeshire, Ceredigion and Evesham seen as exemplars in provision;
- Long term liability - Richmond experienced much good will at first but experiencing some fall out in support;

- Internal conversions may be necessary where scheme introduced - new set of customers so need to increase size, regard to fire regulations; etc.
- Bristol had a short lived scheme involving the Museums, University, transport stations and the Borders bookshops but insufficiently robust – information pamphlets not made available;
- Although not in the “premier league” Exeter, with 26 public toilets, compared favourably with many areas. Suggest investigation of Lincoln City Toilet Strategy because of the City’s similarity to Exeter; and
- Outsourcing to private companies is another option e.g. City Toilets in London. However, they have focussed on hotspots rather than the suburbs.

The following publications were recommended-:

- User and Provider Perceptions of Public Toilet Provision UWE
- Inclusive Urban Design - Public Toilets - Professor Clara Greed - published by Architectural press;
- Universal Design and Design for the Disabled - Selwyn Goldsmith - published by Architectural press;
- Public Toilets in London - London Assembly - Health and Public Services Committee
- Toilet: Public Restrooms and the Politics of Sharing - New York University Press

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DATE OF NEXT MEETING

AGREED that the next meeting be held at 10am on Wednesday 14 September 2011.

(The meeting commenced at 10.00 am and closed at 12.35 pm)

Chair