

COMMUNITY TOILETS WORKING GROUP

Friday 2 December 2011

Present:-

Councillors Mitchell, Branston, Hobden and Thompson

Also Present

Head of Environmental Health Services and Member Service Officer (HB)

Also Present

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

18 **MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 14 SEPTEMBER 2011**

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 September 2011 were agreed as a correct record.

19 **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES - REPRESENTATION FROM INTERESTED PARTIES**

The Head of Environmental Health Services reported that the Rev Iain McDonald, the representative of the Interfaith Group, had submitted apologies but invited him to a meeting of the Group on Tuesday 6 December 2011 in the Fore Street Church.

Councillor Hobden suggested that if there was a branch of the National Association for Cholitis and Chron's, representatives should be invited to attend to give evidence and that, if there was no local group, written representation should be sought. In her view, representation from the group was preferable to GP evidence. Councillor Mrs Thompson referred to water retention problems experienced by those on blood pressure medication and it was felt that the various group representatives attending on the day would be able to give a fair range of user views.

Oxford City Council operated a Community Toilet Scheme and had agreed to host a visit from this group including a meeting with the relevant officer, (who was the co-ordinator of the scheme), and the Portfolio Holder. Oxford retained a number of public toilets although the community toilet scheme total had been reduced. The relevant reports on the background and costs of the scheme would be made available. Members agreed that it would be helpful to speak to the businesses involved on the day as well as the public using the premises.

The Head of Environmental Health Services agreed to provide detailed figures on the operation of the scheme in Oxford including costs and a visit to Oxford for the group was agreed to be arranged for late January/early February 2012, 20 or 27 January being provisionally suggested (subject to Oxford City Council agreeing).

EVIDENCE FROM INTERESTED PARTIES

The Chair welcomed each of the following witnesses, explaining that the group had been established to examine toilet provision in the City and to look at a Community Toilet Scheme (CTS) including financial implications.

Yvonne Pope - Living Options

Yvonne was the disabled access champion for Living Options, a user led Devon charity covering physical and/or sensory disabilities and deaf people.

Previous plans to reduce the number of Council toilets had not been supported by members of the organisation, notwithstanding the recognition that budget cuts were necessary. Both the disabled and the elderly had greater confidence in visiting the City Centre if good quality toilets were widely available. King William Street was popular because of easy access into the City Centre via a ramp/bridge.

It was recognised that a community toilet scheme could be an acceptable addition if the toilets provided were of a sufficiently high standard. Although many businesses already offered use of their toilets for the public, some still lacked disabled adaptations. It was noted that issues relevant to the potential CTC operators were likely to include lack of space, liability and extra disruption to customers. For the disabled, access was a key issue and many toilets were located at the back of a restaurant/café and, although clearly visible, access was hindered by obstacles. Many disabled people were unwilling to use the toilets because of the embarrassment in drawing attention to themselves. Different levels also caused problems if a toilet was not on the same floor as the main entrance. Signage was important, as was sufficient space in the toilet for those with physical constraints. She referred to a good quality toilet at St. Stephen House which was not widely known about by the public.

She sought an assurance that any community toilet scheme would be constantly monitored and the needs of the disabled addressed. She queried the impact of any business subsequently withdrawing from a scheme.

The Head of Environmental Health Services explained the powers of local authorities in ensuring that local businesses provided facilities for the public. Depending on size, businesses were required to provide facilities for the disabled. Where shortcomings were found, recommendations were made and enforcement powers could be used. For small businesses, a single, small, unisex toilet was often provided.

In response to Yvonne Pope acknowledging that there were severe constraints on the budget, the Chair advised that no decision had been made to close toilets and that examining the feasibility of a community toilet scheme was part of the overall assessment of toilet provision in the City.

Yvonne Pope stated that there was room for improvement in toilet provision and cited the toilets in Debenhams, Boots and M&S as templates for good provision. A Guildhall restaurant also provided a toilet for public use but when previously visited she had found it to be somewhat cluttered with mops and buckets. It was important also to keep the route to the toilet clear not only for wheelchair users but visually impaired owners with their guide-dogs. A Member referred to his use of the toilet in Dingles which he admitted was not on the ground floor. Yvonne Pope advised that she was not aware of this facility and stated that if she had more time she would have undertaken a wider survey of toilets in City Centre cafes etc. and suggested

that the availability of toilets for public use could be listed in promotional brochures, web-sites etc.

Responding to the Head of Environmental Health Services in respect of Council owned toilets, she stated that access generally was acceptable but comments had been made that cleanliness could be improved. A further problem was that, in many instances, the toilets had not been flushed. She explained that this was sometimes the result of inaccessible handles or buttons which a disabled person simply could not reach or, if with a disability such as arthritis, could not operate. It was noted that planning applications were considered by Environmental Health Officers to check provision and design of toilets in new buildings but not necessarily the fine design of the toilet cistern handle location. In respect of overall satisfaction amongst her members, she stated that this could only be assessed properly if a comprehensive survey was undertaken across the full membership.

Laura Robinson and Pauline Haggarty - Sure Start

Laura and Pauline reported the views of parents and Surestart managers in relation to any CTS. Concerns expressed included pushchair access, especially where toilets were located on the first or second floors of restaurants and the requirement to pay when the toilets were required quickly. The use of turnstiles at public toilets to facilitate charging was therefore off-putting to mothers with pushchairs. It was noted that increased standards were expected with charging. Generally, people were aware of the availability of toilets in Macdonald's, Marks and Spencer's and BHS etc. A reference was made to a small cafe which allowed use of their toilet by members of the public for a charge. There was a strong view that any community toilet scheme should not discriminate against any member of the public and that the toilets should be open to all.

The Chair explained that community toilets schemes operated elsewhere at no charge, as the businesses received funding from the respective Councils and that they were open to all members of the public to use.

Concerns had been expressed in respect of the King William Street Car Park because of the smell which some thought emanated from the stairwells and it had been noted that the toilets at the Guildhall were small and the sinks awkward

The provision of changing facilities was a key issue. Where available, model separate units were clean, warm and comfortable allowing mothers to sit with children. Mothercare provided such a facility. Department stores such as M&S and BHS toilets could also offer toilets of a high standard.

Commenting on the City's toilet provision in general, reference was made to the Guildhall and Musgrave Row toilets which were less attractive, the former being somewhat constrained and the latter attracting less desirable individuals. Outside the City Centre, Beacon Heath benefitted from toilets that remained open until 7.00pm at present. Parks, such as Heavitree, were made more attractive to families with the presence of toilets. Belmont Park lacked facilities and use was sometimes made of Clifton Hill Sports Centre. Convenience was therefore a key issue.

Generally, those who had been spoken to had not found that Exeter was lacking in toilets and it was noted that Exeter, in fact, was better provided with public toilets than some other areas.

Martyn Rogers - Age UK

Martyn reported that he had undertaken a straw poll of users of the Age UK café. In relation to the Council's public toilets, issues raised had included cleanliness with special reference to the dangers caused from discarded needles and the importance of not reducing toilet numbers. Commenting on City Centre toilets, M&S toilets were very well known to the public and the disabled facility in the Guildhall toilets was praised because of its size. It had been remarked that the Catherine Street toilets were complicated to use and it was recognised that where there was a requirement to pay, toilets were cleaner and standards higher. Pay toilets also reduced the likelihood of misuse especially drug usage. Turnstiles clearly disadvantaged the disabled.

As people already took advantage of toilets in department stores there was support for a community toilet scheme although it was felt that in-house access could be a disincentive to the operator. Access to toilets on first or second floors using a lift or chairs presented difficulties for the elderly and disabled. Many were embarrassed when attention was drawn to themselves including when they sought assistance. Some toilets were occupied as storage facilities and this was a further problem. It had been remarked that a community toilet scheme could only function effectively if adequately promoted including discreet advertisements in shop/restaurant windows. Good signage to the toilets inside the establishment and high cleanliness standards were also important. Again, comments had been made concerning the odour around the King William Street Car Park and it had been remarked that the Cowick Street toilet, where needles had been evident, could benefit from extra cleaning and vigilance. Some older people would plan convenience stops as part of their visit to the City Centre. He concluded that it would be real challenge to maintain existing stock at a high standard given local authority cut backs.

Responding to a Member, he emphasised that the opinions he had gathered were in response to a straw poll only as he lacked the resources to undertake a comprehensive survey of his membership. Nevertheless, an informal view was helpful. Age UK also ran an "Out and About" service collecting the elderly and disabled from their homes and lack of sufficient toilets had never been an issue – many of the clients availed themselves of their home toilets before travelling. However, proposals to cut toilet numbers had aroused considerable opposition.

He admitted that he would be reluctant to allow the use of Age UK toilets by the general public as problems of drug abuse and opportunist theft could arise.

With regard to cost, he believed that many were happy to pay a small admission charge to public toilets to ensure high standards of cleanliness etc. and even a Council Tax increase might be looked upon favourably if an improved City-wide service resulted.

He referred to Exeter Senior Voice, chaired by Councillor Shiel, as a valuable sounding board for the views of the elderly.

Linda Regan - Fawcett Devon

She explained that the Fawcett Society was the oldest gender equality organisation in the country and had been consulted by the County Council for a number of years on gender issues. She had been able to consult some members in spite of the short notice. There had been a long term imbalance in toilet provision and Exeter, as with the rest of the country, did not meet the ideal ratio of 2 to 1 in favour of women. Notwithstanding issues such as pregnancy, menstruation and continence, women took physically longer to use a toilet than men - 80-90 seconds for urination

compared with 32-40 seconds for men. Up to 50% of women experienced some form of loss of bladder control.

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.

She referred to toilets at Budleigh Salterton sea front and the rear of the car park near the Town Hall as effective toilets. Both offered free, stainless steel, unisex toilets. They were therefore easy to use and good examples of toilet provision. She remarked that charging for toilet use was generally considered to be acceptable.

A Member referred to the Richmond Upon Thames website that stated that 90 toilets were available although the Head of Environmental Health Services stated that he understood that these were now reduced in number.

Ms Regan stated that the majority of women were aware of toilet availability in the major department stores. She suggested that some businesses might be reluctant to participate because a community toilet scheme might result in groups of young people proving disruptive to customers.

The Chair thanked all who had attended and asked if they would be prepared to attend a further meeting of the Group if asked to provide any further evidence. All were willing to do so.

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DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Next meeting to be the fact-finding visit to Oxford, provisionally arranged for 20 or 27 January 2012.

(The meeting commenced at 9.30 am and closed at 12.00 pm)

Chair