

ENVIRONMENT AND ATTRACTIVE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

14 FEBRUARY 2011

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR CITY SERVICES

PUBLIC CONVENIENCES

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 The purpose of this report is to inform members about the current provision of public toilets in the City and how the scale and method of provision may need to adapt in response to the changing financial and other circumstances since the last report on the issue in April 2010.

2.0 BACKGROUND

2.1 Local authorities have a power, rather than a duty, to provide public toilets. The 1936 Public Health Act gives local authorities the right to build and run public conveniences if they so wish, but it does not require them to do so. There is no legislative requirement either to cleanse the toilets or to maintain them in a good state of repair.

2.2 The provision of public toilets is therefore an entirely discretionary service for Councils. Despite the lack of legislative duty, historically most local authorities have provided public toilets. The need for public toilets can be made from a number of perspectives including:

- meeting a universal and basic requirement;
- giving groups in society the confidence to be out and about; and
- supporting tourism.

2.3 Conversely, public toilets can attract crime / anti-social behaviour and represent a significant financial burden on local authorities particularly in respect of bringing aged toilets to up an acceptable standard (most of the public toilets in towns and cities are between 50 and 100 years old), particularly in respect of the Disability Discrimination Act. Whilst some of the existing public conveniences are well used, others are not and may not represent value for money.

2.4 According to Government figures there is a continuing downward trend in the number of public toilets being provided as a direct consequence of these challenges.

2.5 The Head of Streetscene manages the budget for public conveniences. This budget covers costs for staff, cleaning and utilities. There is no budget provision for structural maintenance, refurbishment or new development within the scope of the Attractive and Inclusive Portfolio. Public conveniences were identified in the initial scope of the corporate Facilities Management Review in autumn 2010. It was subsequently removed from the scope of the review in late December 2010. Therefore there are no plans currently in place to review the provision of public conveniences.

3.0 CURRENT PROVISION IN THE CITY

3.1 The scale of provision in the City has followed the national trend with the number of public conveniences reducing over time. Public conveniences are currently provided at the following locations:

Area	Location
North	Dene Lane Park Parade Southwick Green Harbour View South Bents Marine Walk Cat and Dog Steps Sea Lane
East	City Centre - Park Lane City Centre - Transport Interchange
West	Barnes Park
Coalfield	Easington Lane Hetton Town Centre
Washington	Concord Bus Station Fatfield – Bonemill Lane Columbia - Westwood Gardens

3.2 During 2010/11 the toilets at Kayll Road have remained closed because of the condition of the building. The toilets on Newcastle Road are now closed and to be demolished to allow for an improvement scheme to Thompson Park funded by SIB grant from the Area Committee.

3.3 Whilst the resort area through Roker and Seaburn is comparatively well provided, the potential for refurbishing existing or possibility providing new facilities is being explored as part of the regeneration plan for the area.

3.4 It is unlikely the Council will be able to fund the development of public conveniences directly, although this may be possible where external grant funding can be accessed or where they can be provided as part of major new development. It is also unlikely in the current and foreseeable financial conditions that the Council's ability to fund the maintenance and upgrade of existing facilities will change. This may further reduce the number of public conveniences provided. In these circumstances, work will be undertaken to explore a less costly alternative method of meeting demand for public conveniences.

4.0 MEETING DEMAND THROUGH ALTERNATE PROVISION

4.1 A task and finish group with Members of the Coalfields Area Committee is currently working on the development of a community toilet scheme for the centre of Houghton-le-Spring. This is in response to a perceived high demand from residents and the lack on any Council operated public conveniences. The

Task and Finish group recognised that the cost of developing a new facility would likely be prohibitive, but that a community toilet scheme involving existing occupiers of properties in the town centre in a formal partnership could offer a workable alternative.

- 4.2 Such community toilet schemes have been operating successfully in a number of local authorities, notably Richmond upon Thames. The scheme works by local businesses including pubs, restaurants and shops making their toilets available to the public during premises opening hours without the need to make a purchase. Premises are identified by a sticker on the window also indicating the type of toilet facilities available, with signposts in the street directing the public to them. In Richmond, businesses receive a small annual payment from the Council as a contribution towards additional expenses incurred through extra usage. The business will also benefit from additional patronage, which is another incentive to participate.
- 4.3 The centre of Houghton has been surveyed to identify premises with toilets which, in principle, may wish to participate. The Area Response Manager will be tasked with continuing the project by contacting the relevant local businesses and constructing a detailed proposal for the Area Committee - which will need to include a significant public awareness programme, possibly using mobile phone technology to signpost users to participating premises.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1 That the Committee receives a further report on the outcome of the Community Toilets pilot in Houghton le Spring and its potential for wider application across the City.
- 5.2 That the Committee receives a further report on the usage of existing public conveniences to inform discussion on future provision.

Contact Officer: Les Clark, Head of Street Scene
0191 561 4501
les.clark@sunderland.gov.uk