

## **Public Loo Review**

### **A review by the Planning, Transportation, Economy & Sustainability (PTES) Overview & Scrutiny Panel**

**1 December 2003**

## **Summary Findings & Recommendations**

### **1.0 Introduction**

Following a referral by the Executive on 1<sup>st</sup> October, The PTES Overview & Scrutiny Panel has undertaken a review of Bath & North East Somerset's WC strategy. A specific aim has been to undertake public consultation on phase 1 of the WC Strategy, which proposes the closure of 16 public toilets.

The Panel undertook this review as a matter of urgency, concluding in public meetings on 21<sup>st</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> November. This paper summarises the Review process and documents the Panel's recommendations and key findings, which have been unanimously agreed.

### **2.0 Review Process**

In approaching this review, the Panel has undertaken wide ranging consultation, taking views from the public and various stakeholder organisations by the following methods:

- Public correspondence on the matter, invited via press releases and posters displayed in all affected public conveniences. A website with information about the review and an e-feedback form was publicised. In excess of 100 letters and e-mails were received, representing a wide range of views.
- An independent market research survey was commissioned and conducted at a number of on-street locations throughout Bath & North East Somerset. 193 interviews were made.
- An open public meeting to hear comments from the public and contributions from various relevant organisations was held on 21<sup>st</sup> November (and reconvened on 25<sup>th</sup> November due to the volume of material to be considered) at the Guildhall, Bath. Question & answer sessions with contributors clarified the issues raised.
- The 'Meeting Structure and Timings' document (appendix A) lists the schedule of contributors that attended the public meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> November.

In considering all the information provided by the review, the panel have developed a set of recommendations supported by core themes outlining the key findings, all provided in this summary document.

In addition, a number of detailed items are available as a record of the review.

- Papers and notes of the public review meeting (21<sup>st</sup> & 25<sup>th</sup> November 2003)  
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- Full contributor statements
- Market Research results
- Public correspondence (in excess of 100 letters and emails)

Copies of these items are available from the Democratic Services Team, Riverside, Keynsham, Tel. (01225) 394411.

### **3.0 Panel Recommendations**

It is the Panel's view that:

1. The report be returned to the Executive member and no action be taken on the proposed closures until the findings and recommendations of the Panel are fully considered; and
2. The whole Council Executive should consider this issue in line with the wider Council responsibilities and revisit the budget issues as the submitted evidence suggests that the service is chronically under funded; and
3. In the circumstances, it is recommended that phases 2 and 3 of the Strategy are reviewed; and
4. Although not a statutory duty, consideration of user need in the provision of public conveniences is seen by all the contributors as fundamental; and
5. The fact that Bath is a World Heritage City with over 2.7 million visitors annually and an associated Management Plan, this can be virtually classified as an essential service in supporting the local economy; and
6. Opportunities for partnerships and sponsorship funding should be actively explored; and
7. The requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act must be fully considered, as well as the impact closures will have upon the elderly, children and those experiencing recognised health problems; and finally
8. Prior to closure, a multi-agency approach is needed to cope with drug use in public conveniences and the associated risks of needle displacement.

### **4.0 Findings - core themes**

The Panel makes the following specific comments as key findings of the review.

#### **4.1 Drug related & safety issues**

- The health and safety of users and council staff is put at risk by the activities of drug users in public toilets.
- Toilets should not be a haven for illegal and anti-social activities.
- Closures will lead to other venues being used for drug taking and consequent needle displacement and higher public health risks.

- Consider more sharps bins in each cubicle.
- Encourage greater cooperation between responsible agencies to resolve the drug problem, e.g. publicise needle exchange schemes.
- The Police should be held responsible for their role in combating illegal activities (drugs, sex) in public toilets.
- Actions of the minority should not be allowed to impact on the needs of the majority of toilet users.
- As employers, the council has a duty to protect its staff. Cleaning practices should be modified to reflect risks whilst maintaining open facilities for the public.

#### **4.2 Public Health**

- The Director of Public Health highlighted the prevalence of urgent continence problems.
- In the general population, 6% have a disabling incontinence condition.
- In the over 40 age group, 15% experience problems of increased urgency and frequency.
- Over age 50, this condition extends to one third of the population and then continues to extend exponentially with age.
- Demographically, Bath & North East Somerset has an older than average population.
- On the public health risk of discarded drugs needles, the Director of Public Health suggested that without access to appropriate disposal facilities, there is a high probability of needle displacement into parks and a consequential higher risk to children.
- It was confirmed that faeces and urine are not a significant health risk.

#### **4.3 Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)**

- There is a need for greater clarity over the impact of DDA legislation on public conveniences. Must older facilities be upgraded or otherwise close?
- Many existing facilities, including some short listed for closure, already provide access for wheelchair users.
- New superloos will be a benefit to disabled as they will be wheelchair accessible.

#### **4.4 Toilets in Parks**

- Toilets in parks must be retained as a service to users.
- Children have a need as they play in parks.
- Without access to sharps boxes in public toilets, there is a high probability of needle displacement into parks and a consequential hazard to children.

#### **4.5 Rural vs. suburban vs. city needs**

- The needs of different areas should be taken into account.
- Bath is designated as a World Heritage City and host to millions of tourist visitors so requires facilities as emphasised in the World Heritage Management Plan.
- Visitors will increase.

- Local needs have also been demonstrated in rural town areas, e.g. Radstock has the only facilities between Bath & Wells.

#### **4.6 Nighttime economy**

- Relevant recommendations of the recent Review of Nightclub Hours by the Housing & Community Safety O&S Panel should be incorporated in a revised WC Strategy.
- The proposed strategy will not have any effect on the problems of late night street urination, since most public conveniences are closed by 5pm.
- City centre signposting to Ham Gardens (open 24 hours) should be improved.
- Mobile urinals are a potential solution and should be explored.
- Sponsorship funding should be sought from pubs & clubs to pay for mobile facilities.

#### **4.7 Walking routes**

- Encouragement of walking routes is a LTP priority.
- Closures on designated routes may discourage walking.
- Specific examples are Pultney Road, Claverton Street and Rainbow Woods.
- Type and length of route should be considered.

#### **4.8 Market Research information**

- Independent market research was commissioned by the Panel from MSS Research to explore aspects of user need and expectations in great detail.
- Public needs have been identified. Results show that there are different attitudes to usage by men & women, residents & non-residents.
- The results are a rich source of information. It should be used to inform the Councils approach to public toilet provision and be incorporated into a revised WC Strategy.

#### **4.9 Cleaning**

- Standards of cleaning are very poor and do not enhance the user experience.
- Cleaning regime is wrongly driven by process rather than assessed on outcomes, i.e. clean & pleasant toilets.
- Higher standards should be expected.
- Questionable value for money in current cleaning contract.
- High staff turnover gives rise to operational problems in providing a consistent service
- Consider use of external contract agencies either to provide full service or to supplement core staff.
- The use of disabled toilets as rough sleeping areas must be tackled as it hinders public use and council employee access for cleaning.

#### **4.10 Public correspondence**

- The consultation undertaken by the panel provides useful insights into a number of factors that could improve the strategy.
- The Executive should note the large postbag (over 100 letters & e-mails) which identify many issues of public concern over the proposed closures.

#### **4.11 The Council's budget priorities**

- The public convenience budget should be thoroughly reviewed and rationalised for alternative savings within the context of the core themes identified by the consultation.
- Compared with other Council's, the public convenience budget is very low.
- Look for savings from elsewhere in the council budget.
- Have all available efficiency savings been explored before closures?
- It was noted that water, electricity and rateable costs varied from site to site.
- A strong bid is required to increase the public convenience budget, not reduce it.
- There has been no joined up thinking about the effects of this strategy, e.g. Direct Services cleaning staff costs & site closure/demolition costs). The net result on the Council's budget has not been calculated.

#### **4.12 Criteria for closure**

- The criteria for closure need to be revised.
- User need, not operating cost, must be a key criterion for assessment in considering a site for closure.
- A cost per user assessment (footfall vs. operating cost) should be developed to objectively demonstrate the economic viability of sites. An economy of scale threshold could be set as a criterion for closure.
- Where a closure is suggested, a credible and convenient alternative, agreed with the owner (e.g. Jolley's who see a positive commercial advantage) must be available.
- Revised criteria should be used to re-prioritise sites for closure.

#### **4.13 Seasonal / alternative opening hours**

- Consider summertime opening and early evening winter closing as opposed to outright closure.
- Carry out research into whether seasonal opening / winter closure would make budget savings.
- Revisit Direct Services contracts for existing requirements on dawn to dusk opening.
- Consider flexible opening hours for specific sites (e.g. parks, tourist areas) to cater for all who visit / use those areas.

#### **4.14 Future of closed buildings & sites**

- The future of closed buildings has not been thought through.
- The costs of closure have not been put into the budget saving equation.
- Currently there is no information on costs of closure & demolition. These are likely to erode projected savings.
- Once a site is closed it is unlikely to be re-instated
- Any capital receipts through selling land or buildings should be re-invested for improvements to the service.

#### **4.15 Alternative funding routes**

- The Council must explore alternative finance and operating methods for public toilets.
- Private sector operation, franchising & charging should be more vigorously pursued.
- The service could be subjected to an external contract bid.
- User charges should be considered to provide income and boost budget.
- Contributions from partner organisations, e.g. Chamber of Commerce, retailers, tourist bodies and others should be actively pursued.
- Finance could support attendants or warden patrols.
- People would be more willing to pay for improved services in some areas than others, e.g. visitors to the city centre, at the coach park, etc.
- The Batheaston Parish Council suggestion should be subjected to further consultation with other town & parish councils to assess wider viability.

#### **4.16 Phase 2 & 3 of the Strategy - Automated 'Superloos'**

- When sited to compliment traditional public convenience facilities, superloos can be very effective, clean, available 24 hours and are accessible to the disabled.
- They are not considered a viable alternative to traditional toilet blocks in busy sites as they are slow to operate and are liable to generate queues.
- The experiences of Chester are illuminating and suggest investigation and further inquiry with other cities.
- People may be reluctant to use them.
- They are an expensive option, more costly to operate than conventional facilities.

### **5.0 Review Structure & Organisation**

O&S Panel:	Planning Transportation, Economy & Sustainability
Chair:	Peter Metcalfe
Panel Members	Chris Cray Peter Edwards Ruth Griffiths Caroline Roberts Sarah Webb Stephen Wilcox
Project Manager:	David Langman, Corporate Performance Unit
Democratic Services:	Michaela Newton Kirsty Denley

*Copies of all papers relating to this review are available from the Democratic Services Team, Riverside, Keynsham, Tel. (01225) 394411.*