

SCRUTINY PANEL - ENVIRONMENT & QUALITY OF LIFE

Minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Panel - Environment & Quality of Life held on Thursday, 24 March 2022 in the remotely via Zoom at 2.30 pm

Committee Members Present: Mr H Blathwayt Dr V Holliday
Mr J Rest Ms L Withington

Officers in Attendance: Corporate Programme & Project Manager (CPPM), Environmental Services Manager (ESM) and Democratic Services and Governance Officer - Scrutiny (DSGOS)

Also in attendance: External Surveyor of Public Conveniences (ESPC)

19 APOLOGIES

None received.

20 MINUTES

Minutes of the meeting held on 24th February 2022 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

21 ACTIONS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

- i. The DSGOS referred to actions identified within the minutes and noted that he had discussed the potential for location categories with the CPPM. The CPPM suggested that it would be difficult to categorise public conveniences in the same way as car parks, though they could be potentially be categorised according to usage. Cllr H Blathwayt suggested a separate identification for public conveniences on the Broads, due to their own varying seasonality, and noted that it would be helpful for Members to review the potential categories in advance of the next meeting.
- ii. The DSGOS noted that the next action was to contact Parish and Town Councils to improve the Council's understanding of public perceptions of its public conveniences. It was noted that a small number of responses had been received which were generally positive, whilst other Councils were expected to discuss the matter at their next meeting.
- iii. The final actions related to identifying potential savings from the cleansing contract, and outlining anticipated cleansing costs for changing places facilities. The ESM stated that each public convenience had an associated cost for cleansing within the contract, and it was possible that individual savings could be made. He added that cleansing of changing places facilities would be determined on a case by case basis, with indicative costs available once the size and specification was known. It was noted that adding changing places facilities to existing public convenience locations was not expected to generate significant additional cleansing costs.

ACTIONS

1. CPPM to share potential categorisation spreadsheet.

22 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

23 ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

None.

24 PUBLIC CONVENIENCE STANDARDS

The Chairman introduced the item and informed Members that an external surveyor of public conveniences (ESPC) had been invited to discuss public convenience standards across the Country. The CPPM stated that whilst the Council regularly undertook conditions surveys, it had not previously assessed its public conveniences from a customer point of view. She added that the Loo of the Year Awards did outline specific standards, but it was also useful to understand what others authorities across the Country provided.

Questions and Discussion

- i. The ESPC informed Members that the Loo of the Year Awards had been established as a commercial entity approximately 25 years ago with the aim of raising the standard of public conveniences across the Country. He added that the standards they set covered issues such as lighting, access arrangements, and offering a range of amenities at each facility. It was noted that for North Norfolk a one size fits all approach was unlikely, as the toilets varied significantly by location. The ESPC noted that many areas across the country had resorted to charging for public convenience use, and had also removed lobby areas in order to deter anti-social behaviour, in addition to reducing costs for lighting, heat and cleansing, with the space instead used for additional cubicles.
- ii. The CPPM stated that charging for public conveniences was not an option that the Council were looking to pursue, but asked whether other authorities had taken this approach to support the improvement of facilities, or to generate additional income. The ESPC replied that public conveniences charges were unlikely to generate surplus income, but fees were generally used to offset management and maintenance costs. The CPPM asked whether paying customers expected higher standards as a result, to which the ESPC replied that customers expected public conveniences to be clean and safe, but not necessarily finished to a higher standard. He added that generally speaking NNDC already appeared to meet these standards, though not necessarily in the most cost-effective way. It was noted for instance that automatic opening and closure of facilities could improve service efficiency and lower costs.
- iii. Cllr J Rest noted that the District had areas with mobile network service, and asked whether this would affect any automated systems. He added that it was also Council policy that car parking charges be used to help fund onsite public conveniences. The ESPC noted that usage often declined in areas where local authorities charged for use of public conveniences. The Chairman asked whether charging authorities provided free usage for disabled and changing places facilities, or whether these were charged at the

same rate. The ESPC replied that whilst these facilities were accessed via different means, they usually had similar charging arrangements in place.

- iv. The ESPC suggested that it would be helpful if the Council properly understood the usage levels of its public conveniences, as well as any key patterns of usage. He added that with this information, the Council would be able to better determine the level of equipment required at each facility, the number of facilities required in each location, and the best opening times. It was suggested that this would help prioritise resources and investment was evidence based.
- v. The Chairman asked whether there was any benefit in installing gender neutral facilities, with direct access cubicles. The ESPC replied that whilst assurances would need to be sought to ensure parity of facilities, allocation of cubicles only came down to signage, as internal fittings would be identical, with any allocations able to be determined on a case by case basis. He added that overall it provided greater flexibility during the peak tourism season, and the option of limited closures during winter. The CPPM noted that some of the Council's new facilities had been built as cubicles, which could be opened and closed individually for repairs or maintenance. She added that whilst there had been some complaints during the initial installation of gender neutral toilets, no further complaints had been received. The ESPC noted that cubicles may not be the best option for very high usage areas, but they did offer the best solution for long-term management and cost efficiencies. Cllr L Withington stated that she was not aware of any issues with the gender neutral toilets in Sheringham, and suggested that it would be possible to close cubicles during periods of low demand, so long as disabled access toilets remained open.
- vi. The ESPC referred to automatic locking systems and noted that high usage levels required fittings to be able to withstand significant strain, which meant they were more expensive, especially in exposed sea front locations. The ESM noted that weathering in coastal locations did cause issues, and in many cases toilet doors had to be made of materials able to withstand the environment, such as galvanised steel. The ESPC stated that there were various materials and fittings available to withstand these conditions, and noted that orientation was also important, as this could be altered to reduce vulnerabilities.
- vii. The ESPC stated that standardising fittings across public conveniences would simplify maintenance and repairs, which would further help to reduce operational costs. It was noted that many of the Councils recently built or refurbished facilities had included new fixtures and fittings, and it was evident that there was considerable scope for standardisation. The ESM noted that in previous years the Environmental Services Team had held responsibility for maintenance, and had kept stock of a number of spare or replacement parts. He added that there was a variety of different sized toilets papers and hand towels in use, which would benefit from standardisation.
- viii. Cllr J Rest asked whether it would be worthwhile selling advertising space within the Council's public conveniences. The ESPC replied that it was unlikely that advertising revenue would generate any significant income, but local businesses may be interested. He added that one of the best means for generating income from public conveniences was to let adjoining spaces to hatch cafes or similar businesses, which would also reduce vandalism and

other antisocial behaviour. The ESM noted that some public bins had presented an opportunity for advertising income, and this could be explored further.

- ix. The CPPM stated that Property Services had sought to standardise plumbing fixings in public conveniences, and suggested that beyond setting standards, it was important to ensure joint consultation between services when designing new facilities.
- x. The Chairman asked whether there were any nationally recognised requirements relative to the number of public convenience users. The ESPC replied that requirements were generally location and usage pattern specific, and usage data would be required to determine this. Cllr L Withington stated that regardless of usage levels, it was important to ensure that the Council's public conveniences were dementia accessible.
- xi. The Chairman noted that current usage data was collected in 2019, and asked whether this would be more reliable than data collected during the Pandemic, given the increase in local tourism. The ESPC replied that it was difficult to know whether usage would return to pre-pandemic levels, but the more data the better.
- xii. Cllr L Withington asked whether it would be possible to determine standards based on location, or whether this would be unrealistic. The ESPC replied that a range of variables had to be considered, with some facilities requiring 'off-grid' toilets where drainage was an issue. Cllr V Holliday noted that the existing 'off-grid' toilet installed by the Council had suffered problems due to high usage, which had significantly limited its ability to process waste. It was noted that this style of toilet relied on evaporation, which had not been possible due to excess additional liquids being poured into the system.

AGREED

- 1. Potential list of standards to be summarised for consideration at future meeting.**

25 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was proposed by Cllr J Rest and seconded by Cllr L Withington to exclude the press and public to discuss exempt information included within the asset register.

RESOLVED

That under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 3 of Part I of Schedule 12A (as amended) to the Act.

26 PUBLIC CONVENIENCE LOCATIONS AND ASSET REGISTER

The DSGOS informed Members that officers responsible for managing the asset register were not available to attend the meeting, however the data had been provided and any questions could be responded to in writing.

Questions and Discussion

- i. It was noted that the columns referred to asset NBV, land NBV and the total value with ownership arrangements outlined on the register.
- ii. The Chairman noted that there was a significant disparity between valuations of the Council's public conveniences dependent on their location and size. It was noted that some select sites had not been included on the register, as they formed part of a larger asset.
- iii. Members discussed the value and location of an asset and suggested that more information would be required from officers if any proposals such as relocation were to be considered. It was noted that there appeared to be other discrepancies that would require an explanation from officers.
- iv. Cllr V Holliday asked whether it would be possible to monitor usage of various locations identified within the register using alternative methods. It was suggested that this may be possible, but data would be unreliable. Existing usage data was discussed and it was suggested that it provided a reasonable indication of usage as it covered a six month period. The costs of the usage surveys were discussed and it was noted that more data had been provided than originally planned.
- v. Cllr L Withington referred to a high usage public convenience not owned by the Council and suggested that it would be helpful if possible, to understand usage of this facility amongst others, as it would have an impact on usage of the Council's own facilities.
- vi. Members agree that it would be helpful to review the asset register again when officers were available to provide context and further information.

AGREED

- 1. Asset register to be reviewed again at May meeting when officers are available to provide context and further information.**

27 TO AGREE ITEMS OF BUSINESS FOR THE NEXT MEETING

- i. The DSGOS informed Members that the Quality of Life Strategy had been drafted and that in order for it to be considered for approval by Cabinet in May or June, it was necessary for the Panel to review the Strategy in April, which would mean deferring discussion of public conveniences. It was suggested that a summary of the public convenience standards discussed could be brought to the May meeting for consideration to form part of the Panel's final recommendations.
- ii. Cllr V Holliday asked whether it was worth undertaking any additional usage surveys, on the basis that discussion was being deferred until May. The CPPM replied that a full survey would take twelve months to complete, and this timeframe may not be practical within the current time constraints of the review. The Chairman noted that he was relatively satisfied with the existing usage data, though higher usage levels may continue after the Pandemic. The DSGOS noted the earlier suggestion that existing data could be multiplied by 1.45 to estimate expected usage if staycations continued at their current rate. The Chairman asked whether further usage data could be gathered from utilities or consumables, though Members accepted that this

would be unreliable data.

- iii. The CPPM suggested that standards and options could be summarised for agreement at the next meeting, to include issues such as accessibility and a potential preference for the removal of lobby spaces. She added that this would be important to ensure that new facilities were built to an agreed standard, with an opportunity for all relevant services to feed into the process, in addition to seeking customer feedback. It was noted that funds made available for data collection could be used to survey the condition of toilets from a user perspective. Cllr H Blathwayt suggested that it would be helpful to explore the options and level of revenue that could be generated from charging in high tourism areas, even if only to rule out the option. Cllr L Withington suggested that it would also be helpful to have the costs and potential savings of automatic locking systems evaluated within a summary report.
- iv. Cllr V Holliday asked whether there were any other aspects of the public convenience management that were yet to be considered prior to agreement of recommendations. The DSGOS replied that the Panel were yet to consider sustainability and cost reduction, and it was likely that Property Services would be required to feed into this discussion with regards to equipment and fittings. Cllr H Blathwayt suggested it could also be useful to invite Cllr E Spagnola to a future meeting, to provide input on accessible and changing places facilities.

AGREED

- 1. April meeting to review the Quality of Life Strategy.**
- 2. May meeting to reconsider location and asset values, sustainability and cost reduction options available for public conveniences.**
- 3. Summary report with appraisal of available public convenience options to be prepared for May meeting to help form recommendations.**

The meeting ended at 4.13 pm.

Chairman