

2025/2026 Budget – Savings from public toilets budget	
Executive Summary	<p>This report provides an update to the report considered by Cabinet at its meeting of 9th September 2024 proposing savings from the public toilet budget.</p> <p>The provision of public toilets is a discretionary service and in light of the worsening financial position of the Council in preparing the 2025/26 budget the ongoing costs of providing these facilities has been reviewed and proposals developed for the Council to close or transfer some facilities to other providers where levels of use are low and/or the Council has no other assets such as car parks which generate income which can support provision of these facilities.</p>
Options considered	<p>The 9th September 2024 report proposed the closure or transfer to other providers of six public toilets provided by the Council and the seasonal (winter) closure of other facilities.</p> <p>Subsequently, attention was focussed on the savings which could be realised from the facilities proposed for closure or transfer.</p>
Consultation(s)	<p>For those facilities proposed for closure or transfer, conversations have been had with key stakeholders (parish councils and local businesses and community organisations) in outlining the Council's position and exploring possible arrangements by which the facilities might be retained through transfer to a third party, sponsorship or alternative financing arrangements.</p>
Recommendations	<p>Cabinet is asked to:-</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) to confirm its support for discussions being progressed with local businesses at Potter Heigham with the objective of securing sponsorship to meet the costs of retaining the Potter Heigham public toilets; 2) to agree that proposals and a business case be prepared for a new public toilet facility to be developed on, or adjoining, the District Council's public car park and principal bus stop at the western end of the High Street in Stalham with a report being presented to Cabinet on such a proposal in the future. In the meantime, the existing toilets will be retained for a minimum of twelve months. 3) to agree that the public toilets in Walsingham be retained at least until March 2026 with further discussions being held with local partners as to whether a sustainable financial model for the facilities can be agreed in the medium-term. 4) to retain the West Runton public toilets at least

	<p>for this summer (through until the end of September 2025) with further discussions being held with local partners as to whether a sustainable financial model for the facilities can be agreed in the medium-term.</p> <p>5) to confirm its support for the position adopted in removing the leased unit at Beach Lane, Weybourne realising a financial saving of approximately £26,000 per annum and retaining the eco-loo at this location and monitoring its use / mis-use and to advise that we will continue to work with Weybourne Parish Council to establish if a more sustainable location can be found for the provision of a public toilet in the village.</p>
Reasons for recommendations	To deliver savings from the public toilet budget as part of preparing the 2025/26 budget and help reduce the deficits shown in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy given contract, wage and energy inflation, significant increases in the Temporary Accommodation and homelessness support and no increase in the District Council's spending power.
Background papers	Cabinet report of 9 th September 2024 2025/2026 Budget papers Medium-Term Financial Strategy

Wards affected	Beeston Regis and The Runtons Coastal Hickling Stalham Walsingham
Cabinet member(s)	Cllr T Adams, Leader of the Council Cllr L Shires, Cabinet portfolio holder for Finance and Assets
Contact Officer	Steve Blatch, Chief Executive, steve.blatch@north-norfolk.gov.uk

Links to key documents:	
Corporate Plan:	A Strong, Responsible, & Accountable Council.
Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS)	The proposals aim to provide savings to help improve the MTFS. We will ensure the Council maintains a financially sound position, seeking to make best use of its staff resources, effective partnership working and maximising the opportunities of external funding and income.
Council Policies & Strategies	

Corporate Governance:

Is this a key decision	No
Has the public interest test been applied	No
Details of any previous decision(s) on this matter	Cabinet 9 th September 2024 Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 11 th December 2024 (Stalham toilets petition)

1. Introduction & Background

- 1.1 The provision and operation of public toilets is a discretionary function for local authorities and in recent years, in response to increasing budget pressures, many authorities have significantly reduced or withdrawn from the provision of these facilities. In contrast, North Norfolk District Council recognises the value of such facilities in terms of the local visitor economy and providing basic amenities for our residents, many of whom are elderly, and currently operates 36 public toilet facilities in locations across the district – meaning that it has one of the largest portfolios of such facilities of any district council in the country. Further, in recent years the Council has made a significant investment in the provision of new (replacement) facilities, including Changing Place facilities at Fakenham (Queens Road), Holt (Albert Street - due to be completed in February 2025), North Walsham (Vicarage Street), Sheringham (The Leas) and Wells-next-the-Sea (Stearmans Yard); and significant refurbishment of facilities at Bacton, North Walsham (New Road), Sheringham (Lushers Passage and The Leas) and Walcott. The revenue budget for the public convenience service for 2024/25 was £947,000.
- 1.2 Notwithstanding the above, given the pressures on the Council's budget, a report was presented to the meeting of Cabinet on 9th September 2024 proposing that consideration be given to the permanent closure of a number of public toilets provided and operated by the District Council as part of the need to identify savings in the setting of the 2025/26 budget. A second recommendation was made that consideration also be given to the seasonal (winter) closure of a number of other facilities largely in coastal locations.
- 1.3 The facilities proposed for review / permanent closure had low levels of use, were often older facilities and were in locations where the District Council had no other assets, such as public car parks, where there was the potential for the authority to earn income which could make a contribution to the operating costs of the toilets.
- 1.4 In terms of the facilities proposed for seasonal closure, it was established that such an arrangement would be costly and difficult to manage without delivering any significant savings because of the contract and working arrangements put in place by the Council's contracting partner, SERCO and the large numbers of visitors to the coast over the Christmas and New Year periods when there would be an expectation that public toilet facilities should be open for use. This would make the management of any seasonal closures challenging in terms of the Council's reputation; and it was therefore agreed that the seasonal closure proposals would not be taken forward, but that efforts would be made to either close, transfer or identify alternative financing options for the six public toilet facilities listed below.

2. Proposals and Options

2.1 Hickling Staithe:-

- 2.1.1 Agreement has been reached with the Norfolk Wildlife Trust for this facility to be transferred to the Trust which acquired the Pleasure Boat Inn and adjoining land in 2023 and has plans to develop new visitor facilities at this location to promote access to and understanding of the unique Hickling Broad environment.
- 2.1.2 A report was presented to Cabinet on this transfer arrangement at its meeting of 2nd December 2024 and the transfer has been completed delivering an ongoing revenue saving of approx. £14,500 per annum from 2025/26.
- 2.1.3 This matter is now closed and requires no further decision or action by the Council.

2.2 Potter Heigham:-

- 2.2.1 The public toilets at Potter Heigham occupy a location on Bridge Road, a short distance back from the river, staithe and the original Potter Heigham Bridge. The facilities are surrounded on three sides by the Lathams of Potter Heigham business and, compared to other public toilets in the district, have low levels of use. The District Council has no other assets in Potter Heigham such as a car park from which income can be earned to contribute towards the costs of providing the toilets.
- 2.2.2 A meeting was held with representatives of Potter Heigham Parish Council on 25th November 2024 when it was established that the Parish Council would not be in a position to assume responsibility for the toilets moving forward and comment was made that if the District Council could not continue to provide the facilities, some form of transfer to local businesses or sponsorship model should be explored.
- 2.2.3 Enquiries have therefore been made of local businesses as to the possibility of there being a sponsorship or funding arrangement to retain the public toilets in Potter Heigham and these discussions are being progressed, with some confidence that a successful outcome can be achieved.
- 2.2.4 Cabinet is therefore asked to confirm its support for these discussions being progressed with the objective of securing sponsorship to meet the costs of retaining the Potter Heigham public toilets.

2.3 Stalham:-

- 2.3.1 The public toilets at Stalham occupy a location just off the High Street, to the rear of Stalham Town Hall on a narrow footpath leading to Tesco's car park and the A149 Stalham Bypass and bus stop. The facilities are a legacy of the former Stalham Market and sale ground, now developed as the Tesco supermarket, which has customer toilets. Compared to other public toilets in the district, the toilets have very low levels of use and therefore represent poor value for money.

- 2.3.2 Essentially, these toilets are in the “wrong” location within the town. A better location for the toilets might be at the western end of the High Street, where the District Council provides a public car park and the main bus stop serving the town is located. In proposing that the existing facilities are closed, the District Council has said it is prepared to consider alternative provision on or close to the High Street car park.
- 2.3.3 Local ward members and the Town Council have objected to the proposed closure of the facilities by the District Council, including the submission of a petition discussed by O&S at its meeting of 11th December, stating that the toilets provide an important amenity for residents and visitors attending events in the town and high street.
- 2.3.4 Despite offering to meet with the Town Council to discuss, a meeting has only recently been arranged to be held on 30th January. In the meantime, the District Council has been provided with details of a proposal to develop part of the land adjoining the Council’s car park for a residential development, leaving a small area of land considered to have limited development potential being offered to the Council. Consideration is therefore being given to developing a business case for the District Council to acquire this land and extend the District Council car park, as part of which consideration could be given to providing new (replacement) public toilets for the town.
- 2.3.5 Cabinet is therefore recommended to agree that proposals and a business case be prepared for a new public toilet facility to be developed on, or adjoining, the District Council’s public car park and principal bus stop at the western end of the High Street in Stalham with a report being presented to Cabinet on such a proposal in the future. In the meantime, the existing toilets will be retained for a minimum of twelve months.

2.4 **Walsingham:-**

- 2.4.1 The public toilets at Walsingham occupy a location in the centre of this historic village, on the High Street and adjacent to the entrance to the grounds of Walsingham Abbey (which has its own visitor toilets). The facilities are considered to be of a reasonable standard. Historically, the District Council leased land and operated the car parks in the village at Bridewell Lane and Station Yard, but this arrangement came to an end approximately twenty years ago and the Council now has no other assets in Walsingham from which income can be earned to contribute towards the costs of providing the toilets.
- 2.4.2 A meeting was held with representatives of Walsingham Parish Council and approx. 12 representatives from the local community on 29th November 2024, when the local community was critical of the Council’s proposals and strongly objected to the proposed closure / transfer of the facilities.
- 2.4.3 There was, however, discussions within the meeting with the Parish Council around the wider budget pressures the Council faced, particularly around Temporary Accommodation and a number of “offers” were made by the church interests and the Walsingham Estate which are now being followed up by the Housing Team, which could “save” the Council some money, costs or budget perhaps allowing the toilets to be retained.
- 2.4.4 Beyond such a position being reached, and in the context of the District Council’s budgetary pressures and anticipated local government

reorganisation, the Council believes that further thought will need to be given to developing a sustainable financial model for the toilets in Walsingham to be retained, as in other locations where large numbers of visitors attend events such as at Fakenham Race Course, Cromer Carnival, Worstead Festival etc the organisers of such events would provide toilets and in this respect some responsibility for the provision of such facilities used by large numbers of pilgrims should arguably be met by church organisations rather than District Council Tax payers.

2.4.5 Cabinet is therefore recommended to agree that the public toilets in Walsingham be retained at least until April 2026 with further discussions being held with local partners as to whether a sustainable financial model for the facilities can be agreed in the medium-term.

2.5 **West Runton:-**

2.5.1 The public toilets at the West Runton beach access are possibly the most modest toilet facilities the Council provides (after the Weybourne facilities) – being a small block with male and female (no accessible or adapted) facilities believed to date from the 1930s. Given their location just above the beach at the end of Water Lane, the block does not have an electricity supply and therefore no lighting or hot water. The annual costs of providing the toilets at West Runton is approx. £15,500 per annum, but it would also be expected that the Council will need to incur additional costs in the medium term in upgrading the facilities.

2.5.2 The block stands at a level “above” the beach but is considered to be at risk of flooding or damage at the time of any storm surge event. Previously, in 2016, the Council had plans prepared to relocate the toilets (through the provision of a new build facility) on the site of the public shelter as part of the Deep History Coast initiative, but the Council’s attempt to register the land on which the toilets were to be provided was the subject of objections by local fishing interests and so the proposals were not taken forward.

2.5.3 The District Council does not have any income generating assets at the West Runton beach access location – the car park and café being in private ownership.

2.5.4 Following the publication of the Cabinet agenda in September proposing the closure or transfer of the West Runton facilities the Council received a number of representations from the principal business (car park and café) owner, Runton Parish Council, a number of transport and education / activity holiday providers who take visiting school groups to the West Runton beach, as well as perhaps a dozen members of the public raising concerns about the potential loss of the facilities at this location and the implications for the beach’s Blue Flag status.

2.5.5 A meeting was held with representatives of Runton Parish Council and the owners of the Water Lane car park and café on 3rd October 2024 when a number of issues around the provision of these facilities was discussed – not least the perceived private benefit realised by the car park and café business of the public provision of the facilities financed by District Council Tax payers, the relationship with the Blue Flag status, the annual revenue costs involved in the provision of the facilities and the need for investment in the facilities in the medium-term. Following the meeting, Runton Parish Council advised that

they would not be prepared to assume responsibility for the toilets on the grounds that they would represent an ongoing cost to local residents.

- 2.5.6 At the same time, the Council received a number of representations from local coach operators and education and activity holiday centres who took many hundreds of young people to the West Runton beach throughout the year. We have therefore held conversations with these interests to understand better the needs of these groups as the Council had little understanding of the large number of such visits to West Runton beach and their use of the public toilet facilities. These conversations have highlighted that it would not be appropriate to look to transfer the ownership and future operation of the toilets at this location to the owners of the car park and café business as this would further increase the perception of this being a “privately owned” beach.
- 2.5.7 Cabinet is therefore recommended to retain the West Runton public toilets at least for this summer (through until the end of September 2025) and undertake further consultation with local stakeholders as to whether a sustainable financial model for the facilities can be agreed in the medium-term.

2.6 **Weybourne:-**

- 2.6.1 Following a long campaign lobbying for the provision of public toilets at the Beach Lane car park in Weybourne, and recognising the considerable costs and risks involved in providing permanent facilities at that location because of the distance to utility connections (water, foul drainage and electricity) in Beach Lane and flood risk associated with the car park during storm surge events; a modest eco-loo facility was provided at the car park from the Spring of 2021. It was considered, given the relatively modest levels of need at that location (predominantly sea anglers and people walking the Norfolk Coast Path) meaning that the “dwell time” of visitors to the beach was relatively short, that this facility would meet the demand for a toilet facility at this location and, before commissioning, officers visited similar facilities at a nature reserve and golf course to understand how such a facility would “work”.
- 2.6.2 However, whilst the single eco-loo facility was provided, the travel restrictions relating to the COVID pandemic which resulted in limited opportunities for overseas travel in the summer of 2021 and in to 2022, saw large numbers of day-trippers and independent travellers in motorhomes and campervans visit North Norfolk. This resulted in significant use of the eco-loo facility, including mis-use by motorhome and camper van owners who, because of the “remote” location, emptied toilet cassettes into the eco-loo. This compromised the workings of the toilet, introducing chemicals into the toilet and overwhelming the capacity of the “tank”.
- 2.6.3 The significant costs in officer and contractor time involved in managing (and emptying) the eco-loo and continued large numbers of visitors to the North Norfolk Coast during 2021 and 2022 saw the Council provide additional “temporary” toilets at this location comprising male and female facilities in a leased container structure and the eco-loo being fitted with a Radar key as an accessible toilet facility. However, the leased container structure required regular servicing through the provision of water from a bowser and frequent emptying, again because of mis-use by motorhome and campervan owners emptying their toilet cassettes into the facility, resulting in the waste storage

tank regularly overflowing. The (significant) costs of leasing, maintaining and cleansing the “temporary” facilities and their continued mis-use meant that the facilities at Weybourne were the most costly public toilets operated by the Council – with the cost in 2023/24 being in excess of £32,000.

- 2.6.4 Whilst it is recognised that the District Council does receive some income from the Beach Lane car park in Weybourne, the continued high costs of providing and operating the toilets at this location represents poor value for money for District Council Tax payers and therefore the facilities were proposed for closure / withdrawal. Alternative means of funding the provision was considered – such as offering a concession space at the car park, but this proposal was the subject of strong opposition from businesses in Weybourne village and the Parish Council.
- 2.6.5 A meeting was held with representatives of Weybourne Parish Council on 15th October 2024 when the challenging context of providing public toilets at the Beach Lane car park was outlined and, to an extent, was understood. Representatives of the Parish Council expressed disappointment at the District Council’s decision to close and remove the facilities, not least because they felt more visitors had been attracted to Weybourne Beach through the promotion of the location as part of the Deep History Coast initiative and provision of picnic benches etc, but it was accepted that the Parish Council would not have the capacity to assume responsibility for the operation of the toilets moving forward. Alternative provision closer to the village (perhaps at the Village Hall as at Cley) was discussed and the District Council advised that we would be happy to support any grant applications made to provide such facilities in a location where main utility connections were available.
- 2.6.6 Following the meeting with the Parish Council it was agreed that the leased “temporary” modular toilets would be removed from late November 2024 generating an ongoing financial saving for the District Council, and that the eco-loo facility would be retained and operated as per its original installation – ie as a single facility available for use by all, with mis-use managed and monitored through additional signage etc. This would see the modest toilet facility retained at this location which seems, at least to the District Council, to be a reasonable compromise given the challenging context / location of the Beach Lane car park – distant from mains utility connections and subject to flooding at times of storm surge events. The removal of the leased unit and its regular servicing realises a financial saving of approx. £26,000 per annum.
- 2.6.7 Cabinet is asked to confirm its support for the position adopted in removing the leased unit at Beach Lane, Weybourne realising a financial saving of approximately £26,000 per annum and retaining the eco-loo at this location and monitoring its use / mis-use.

3. Corporate Priorities

- 3.1 This report is linked to the Corporate Plan under A Strong, Responsible and Accountable Council.
- 3.2 We will look to ensure the Council maintains a financially sound position, seeking to make the best use of its staff resources, effective partnership working and maximizing the opportunities of external funding and income.

- 3.3 We aim to provide effective and efficient delivery of the Council's public toilet portfolio. Managing our finances to ensure best value for money, continuing a service improvement programme to ensure our services are delivered efficiently, providing services that are value for money and meet the needs of our residents, ensuring that strong governance is at the heart of all we do, creating a culture that empowers and fosters an ambitious, motivated workforce and exploring opportunities to work further with stakeholders and partner organisations.

4. Comments from the S151 Officer

The provision of Public Conveniences is a discretionary service and at a time when the Council needs to make savings difficult decisions need to be taken in order to balance the budget. Some of these decisions are around toilet closures. A reduction in the number of Public Conveniences will result in savings which will contribute to reducing the forecast budget deficit in future years.

5. Comments from the Monitoring Officer

This subsequent report further details the Council's financial position and its need to consider where savings may be made in this regard. Provision of public toilets is a discretionary service but one which incurs ongoing costs. As a discretionary service, a review of these facilities is legitimate, including further discussions, considerations of alternative provision models, or actions to assist with this review.

6. Risks

- 6.1 The reputational risks of closing public toilets, particularly in those communities where facilities are closed or proposed for closure, are recognised. However, the risks to the Council of not realising savings to deliver a balanced budget would be far greater. The Council has therefore undertaken a considered approach in delivering a balanced budget for 2025/26 as part of which small savings (approx. 5%) have been proposed from the public toilet budget.
- 6.2 Looking forward in the context of devolution and Local Government Reorganisation, whilst the Government has stated that reorganisation and reform of local government services should generate efficiencies and allow more resource to be directed to frontline neighbourhood services; North Norfolk District Council has concerns over whether any new larger authority, with likely pressures on its budgets, would see the retention and operation of such a large portfolio of public toilet facilities to be a priority. The Leader of the Council has written to both MHCLG and DCMS outlining such concerns, but in the meantime believes that there would be merit locally in holding discussions with Town and Parish Councils about future transfer and local funding models in order to safeguard the future of such facilities in the district.

7. Net ZeroTarget

- 7.1 Closing or transferring public toilets from our asset register will realise some small improvement in the Council's Net Zero position although the decisions taken to close or transfer toilets has been made for financial, rather than Net Zero, reasons.

8. Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

- 8.1 Some concerns have been raised that decisions to close public toilets could disproportionately impact people with health issues, as well as women and the elderly.
- 8.2 However, the provision of public toilets by local authorities is a discretionary function and many councils have already reduced their public toilet portfolio or withdrawn from providing such a service altogether. In light of the pressures on the Council's budgets, particularly in meeting our statutory homelessness duties and that the local government financial settlement didn't increase our core spending power, we have little choice but to realise savings and efficiencies particularly from discretionary service areas in setting a balanced budget for 2025/26.

9. Community Safety issues

- 9.1 The proposals made to close or transfer a small number of public toilets are not considered to raise any community safety issues.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations

10.1 In setting a balanced budget for 2025/26 it has been necessary for the Council to propose and deliver efficiencies and savings. This has involved difficult decisions including in some discretionary service areas such as the provision of public toilets. North Norfolk District Council has one of the largest portfolios of public toilets of any district council in the country and therefore consideration has been given to closing or transferring ownership of a small number of facilities which have low levels of use or are in locations where the Council has no income generating assets such as car parks such that the costs of providing the facilities represent poor value for money and/or a direct cost to District Council Tax payers.

Cabinet is therefore asked to:-

- 1) to confirm its support for discussions being progressed with local businesses at Potter Heigham with the objective of securing sponsorship to meet the costs of retaining the Potter Heigham public toilets;**
- 2) to agree that proposals and a business case be prepared for a new public toilet facility to be developed on, or adjoining, the District Council's public car park and principal bus stop at the western end of the High Street in Stalham with a report being presented to Cabinet on such a proposal in the future. In the meantime, the existing toilets will be retained for a minimum of twelve months.**
- 3) to agree that the public toilets in Walsingham be retained at least until March 2026 with further discussions being held with local partners as to whether a sustainable financial model for the facilities can be agreed in the medium-term.**

- 4) to retain the West Runton public toilets at least for this summer (through until the end of September 2025) with further discussions being held with local partners as to whether a sustainable financial model for the facilities can be agreed in the medium-term.**
- 5) to confirm its support for the position adopted in removing the leased unit at Beach Lane, Weybourne realising a financial saving of approximately £26,000 per annum and retaining the eco-loo at this location and monitoring its use / mis-use and to advise that we will continue to work with Weybourne Parish Council to establish if a more sustainable location can be found for the provision of a public toilet in the village.**