

Public Conveniences Engagement

Community Services Committee – 15 July 2024

Report of: Head of Communities

Purpose: For information

Publication status: Open

Wards affected: All

Executive summary:

On 13 June 2024, the Committee received a report about the future refurbishment of public conveniences. At that meeting, it was agreed that a public consultation should be carried out to assess the views of the public on the value of public conveniences. However, this was agreed in the absence of information about potential consultation costs, risks and timescales and without establishing and agreeing clear objectives about what exactly residents and stakeholders will be consulted on. It was also agreed in the context of an out-of-date review of public conveniences.

Upon reflection, it is considered that Members of the Committee should be made aware of the budgetary implications, risks and timelines of a public consultation together with the impact a consultation is likely to have on current plans for major repairs and improvements at certain sites.

This report sets out a revised plan to begin engagement to assist with developing future proposals and a strategy for public conveniences in the district without delays to the planned repairs and improvement.

This report supports the Council's priority of: Building a better Council

Contact Officer

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Recommendation to Committee:

- A. The Committee's previous decision to proceed with a full public consultation be varied as follows:
- (i) initially, officers arrange engagement sessions with key stakeholders, including relevant Ward Members and Parish Councillors, to obtain their views, ideas and information that will enable a strategy and clear proposals to be developed.
 - (ii) Agree the engagement process in (i) will allow the current planned repairs and improvements to proceed, namely the current works to the facilities on Godstone Green, Whyteleafe, Warlingham Green and works due to commence on the facility in the Ellice Road car park, Oxted later in July.

Reason for recommendations:

To ensure that a strategy is developed, through engagement with key stakeholders, with a clear set of proposals for the Council's public conveniences. Whilst this strategy is being developed, the significant repairs and improvements planned will continue to ensure that several public conveniences across the District can either stay open or re-open.

Introduction and background

1. The Committee received a report on the public convenience refurbishment plan at its June 2024 meeting. This included an out-of-date appendix outlining the outcome of a desktop review of public convenience sites which had been carried out in 2022. It is acknowledged that inclusion of that appendix may have detracted from the intended aims of the report which were to update Members about the progress of the public conveniences refurbishment and to propose an approach for prioritising future investment.
2. The Committee agreed for a public consultation to be carried out to assess the views of the public, Parish Councils and Ward Members on all existing public conveniences and their value to the community. However, this was agreed without information on potential consultation costs, risks and timescales and without clarifying consultation methods and objectives.
3. A thorough public consultation exercise can take over 6 months to complete which would include design, implementation, an adequate timescale for responses, analysis of responses, and producing a report with recommendations. Such a timeline could mean delaying the delivery of agreed actions until the start of the 2026/27 financial year.

4. Contractors are currently working on Godstone Green toilets and repairing the roof at Warlingham Green. In addition, work is due to start on the facility in Ellice Road car park, Oxted in July 2024. Delaying the planned repairs and improvements pending the outcome of a public consultation is likely to have unintended consequences such as short/medium term closures if investment is needed. For example, following a recent visit to Whyteleafe toilets the roofing contractor has advised that the roof needs replacing as opposed to repairing. Delays to replacing this roof would add to the short/medium term closures. With sites over 30 years old more closures could be imminent.

Potential Consultation Costs

5. An approximate estimated cost of conducting the consultation would be around £25-30k. This would be for a professional consultant to carry out the work and be commissioned via a procurement framework. As part of the scope the consultant could carry out some footfall analysis.
6. An Online survey carried out in house by our communications team would cost around £1000 for a week's worth of work. This would not include any analysing of the results, which would require additional officer time and cost. An online survey would not form a robust consultation approach on its own.
7. To carry out a footfall exercise (with automated equipment installed) is estimated to cost around £20k plus additional insurance costs since the equipment is often vandalised.
8. Holding engagement workshops with an external facilitator would be approx. £5k plus any expenses. In addition, this would require 5 days work of at least two senior officers, plus any one-to-one meetings.
9. There are no amounts in the 2024/25 Revenue Budget for any of the costs to carry out the consultation or engagement so they would have to come out of the funding available for toilet refurbishment.

Risks

10. The methodology for public consultations must be sufficiently robust to provide meaningful feedback.
11. A public consultation would in effect pause any decisions on public conveniences and delay the planned improvements and investment in the Council's public conveniences estate. This could result in short/medium term closures where works are required.

Conclusion

12. To enable officers to progress with the public toilet refurbishment programme, it is crucial to identify the priorities for investment. At this stage, Members' are requested to allow officers to engage in discussions with key stakeholders to explore and develop a set of proposals for public convenience provision within the constraints of a limited budget.
13. Once the strategy is agreed, should the proposals suggest removal of services or a significant change to the operating model, then consulting on these proposals would be the recommended next step.

Key implications

Comments of the Chief Finance Officer

As noted in the report a potential consultation is estimated to cost between £1k - £30k, plus the opportunity cost of officer time to facilitate the consultation process. There are no funds set aside in the budget for 2024/25 for the external costs.

Comments of the Head of Legal Services

The Head of Legal and Monitoring Officer confirms that there are no legal reasons preventing Members from approving the recommendations in this report.

Equality

An equality impact assessment for all ten public conveniences will be carried out as part of the refurbishment project. Any changes to services will need to ensure that it does not discriminate against any resident or visitor to the District, that may fall into a protected group as defined in the Equality Act 2010.

Climate change

Refurbishing public toilets can have several impacts on climate change, primarily through energy efficiency, water conservation and waste management improvements.

- LED lighting could replace incandescent or fluorescent lights, reducing electricity consumption.
- Upgrading ventilation systems with more energy-efficient models can reduce energy.
- Installing low-flow toilets, urinals and faucets reduces water usage.

- Using recycled, locally-sourced or sustainable materials for construction and refurbishment can reduce the carbon footprint.

Appendices

None

Background papers

None.

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