



Council name	COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL
Name and date of Committee	OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 30 JANUARY 2024 CABINET – 1 FEBRUARY 2024
Subject	REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE'S PUBLIC CONVENIENCES REVIEW GROUP
Wards affected	All Cirencester wards; Bourton Village; Stow; Camden and Vale; Coln Valley; Moreton East; Moreton West; Fairford North; Lechlade, Kempton and Fairford South; Northleach; Tetbury Town; Tetbury East and Rural;
Accountable member	Councillor Tony Slater, Chair of the Public Conveniences Review Group Email: Tony.Slater@cotswold.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Claire Locke, Assistant Director – Property and Regeneration Email: Claire.Locke@Cotswold.gov.uk
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Summary/Purpose	To present to Cabinet the recommendations of the Public Conveniences Review Group
Annexes	Annex A – Public Conveniences Review Group Terms of Reference Exempt Annex B – Public Conveniences Proposal
Recommendation(s)	That Cabinet resolves to agree its response to the 11 recommendations set out in the body of this report.
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Deliver the highest standard of service● Support health and wellbeing● Enable a vibrant economy
Key Decision	NO
Exempt	YES – Annex B is exempt from publication
Consultees/	Overview and Scrutiny Committee



COTSWOLD
DISTRICT COUNCIL

Consultation	
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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to establish a Public Conveniences Review Group to review the future provision of public conveniences and make recommendations to Cabinet. The review was set in the context of a service which provides 15 sets of facilities district-wide and requires a high level of subsidy. The Group reviewed options to close, transfer or alter charges for public conveniences, whilst considering the needs of users, other local provision and affordability.
- 1.2 The recommendations put forward provide a balance between continued provision of good quality facilities and reducing the financial burden on the Council.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to establish a Public Conveniences Review Group (“the Review Group”) on 26 September 2023 and agreed the Review Group’s terms of reference at that meeting, subject to final amendments made by the Review Group at their first meeting. The final terms of reference were reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 31 October 2023 and are attached as Annex A.
- 2.2 The Group held a total of four meetings from October to December 2023. Members of the Review Group also undertook a number of site visits in order to see the public conveniences facilities first hand and report back to the Review Group on their findings.
- 2.3 Cotswold District Council operates fifteen public toilet sites across the district, in 10 towns and villages. During 2007 and 2008, ten of the sites were refurbished, introducing up to date systems and charging (currently 40p per use). The Council has more recently invested in card readers at the ten sites that were refurbished to enable cashless payments. The remaining five sites are still free to use.
- 2.4 Reactive maintenance is dealt with as and when necessary, however no further refurbishments or improvements have taken place. The cleaning and responsive maintenance is contracted to Danfo UK Ltd. At the meeting of Cabinet on 17 July 2023, the decision was made to extend the contract to 31 September 2024. The contract cost is the main expenditure for each site, which has significantly increased over the last year due to wages, fuel, consumables, and cleaning products.

3. APPROACH AND EVIDENCE GATHERING

- 3.1 To inform their evidence gathering and deliberations members of the Review Group visited public conveniences facilities across the district. Photographs were taken and Members fed back their views on condition and access. Most of the facilities visited were considered to be in good condition, though the condition of some of the facilities required improvement.



- 3.2 Data on service costs, usage and (where relevant) income was reviewed on an individual site by site basis. This included a summary which showed the net cost to the Council of each use of the facilities and the overall net losses the service incurs annually. For 2022/23 the total net cost to the Council was £166,184 and total usage across all 15 sites was 280,877 (range: 3,863 to 64,587). This equates to a net cost to the Council of 59p per use on average across all sites (range: 22p to £2.31).
- 3.3 The Review Group wrote to the Town and Parish Councils with Council-provided public conveniences in their areas seeking their input. Written representations were received from Bibury Parish Council and Northleach Town Council alongside verbal representations from Moreton-in-Marsh Town Council and Bourton on the Water Parish Council.
- 3.4 The Review Group spoke to a representative of the current contractor, Danfo who attended a meeting to discuss options for change, service challenges and costs.
- 3.5 The Group wrote to a number of national and Gloucestershire based disability groups seeking input. A written submission was received from Crohns and Colitis UK, detailing their position on access to public toilets, which the group considered.
- 3.6 The Chair of the Group spoke to a Cabinet Member at East Devon District Council, where a similar public toilet review had been undertaken.
- 3.7 The Group would like to thank all of those who gave evidence or otherwise contributed to the review.

4. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 At the conclusion of their evidence gathering the Group agreed a series of recommendations to Cabinet. The recommendations are aimed at ensuring the Council can continue to provide good quality public convenience facilities across the district in a way that will be more affordable to the Council going forward into what will be a very challenging financial environment for all local councils.

Cleaning and Maintenance

- 4.2 The Review Group considered whether responsibility for the cleaning and maintenance should be brought in-house. It was noted that the Council would either need to enter into a procurement exercise in early 2024 or make arrangements for the transfer of the service from the current contractor to the Council when the current contract ends on 1 October 2024.
- 4.3 The Review Group concluded that the current contract has provided good value for money for the Council and a good standard of service. It is anticipated that the cost to the Council will increase under a new contract. However, it is considered unlikely that an in-house service would generate any savings to mitigate the expected cost increases.



- 4.4 The Review Group understands that the main service costs are staff pay, fuel, consumables (soap, toilet paper and cleaning products) and utilities. The Council has limited ability to reduce any of these costs whereas a contractor has the benefit of bulk buying supplies, cross-contract management and access to a wider workforce. If the Council took on these services it would carry both the cost risk and staffing risk around sickness absence and recruitment. There is also a reputational risk if the Council were to bring the service in-house and fail to deliver an equally good or better service.

Recommendation 1 – That the Council seeks to re-tender the cleaning and maintenance contract rather than bring the service in house.

Reducing the annual revenue cost to the Council

- 4.5 Whilst provision of public conveniences is a discretionary service, the Review Group recognised the importance of easy access to facilities for shoppers and tourists. However, the existing level of subsidy (which is likely to increase under a future contract) is unsustainable for the Council. The Review Group therefore considered options for protecting service provision whilst reducing the net level of subsidy.
- 4.6 The Review Group concluded that it would be unrealistic for the Council to seek to fully recover the cost of the service through charging, so the Council's aim should be to reduce the annual subsidy to a sustainable level. In this context the Group felt that the Council can no longer provide facilities that are free to use.

Recommendation 2 – That the Council seeks to reduce the annual revenue cost of providing public conveniences facilities, given that it would not be realistic to seek full cost recovery through charging, or to provide facilities that are free to use.

District-wide provision of public conveniences

- 4.7 There are 15 sets of facilities across 10 Towns and villages. Cirencester has 3 sites operated by Cotswold District Council and there are 2 sites provided by Cirencester Town Council. Bourton on the Water, Stow on the Wold and Tetbury each have two sets of facilities operated by the District Council.
- 4.8 Where there are multiple facilities provided they are located relatively close together. It was also noted that town and village centres have multiple cafes, restaurants, public houses and tourist attractions which have toilets available for customers.



- 4.9 Whilst there is considered to be a need for continued service provision, there could be a reduction in the number of facilities provided which would substantially reduce costs. The Review Group has put forward site specific proposals in Exempt Annex B. The Review Group suggests that, as a point of principle, the Council should continue to provide at least one District Council operated set of facilities in each of the 10 towns and villages that currently have them.

Recommendation 3 – That the Council commits to retaining at least one District Council provided public conveniences facility in each town and village within the district that currently has one.

- 4.10 The Review Group considered the option of transferring responsibility for facilities to town and parish councils. It was considered that town and parish councils were unlikely to be willing to take on sites given that they require an ongoing subsidy.
- 4.11 Whilst there has been limited interest to-date from Town and Parish Councils in taking on the facilities, the recommendation is that three town councils in are offered the opportunity to take on the facilities identified in Exempt Annex B.
- 4.12 Should the Town Councils not wish to take the facilities on and assume responsibility for all costs and income, the Review Group recommends that the facilities be closed and the buildings repurposed for other commercial opportunities.

Recommendation 4 – That the Council opens discussions with the relevant Town Councils about the transfer of responsibility for four sites in towns that have more than one district council provided facility, or where town councils are not willing, the Council seeks to close the facilities and repurpose the buildings to generate a commercial opportunity, as set out in Exempt Annex B. This approach is expected to result in a maximum annual revenue saving of £39,061.

Charging for usage

- 4.14 There are currently 5 sites which do not have charging in place. Under recommendation 4, one of these (in Tetbury) would close. The Review Group recommends that the Council invests in the remaining sites to install charging mechanisms so that income can help part-fund service provision. This investment would have a short payback period of c. 1 year and would also ensure a more equitable service provision across the district.



- 4.15 The Council has previously allocated capital funding for enabling cashless payments and there is funding already in the capital programme which could be used for this specific purpose at the 4 sites.

Recommendation 5 – That the Council allocates £47,200 in the capital programme to introduce charging at the four retained sites that are currently free to use, utilising the existing capital budget (of c. £34,000) for purchasing and installing card readers. This investment will ensure that the Council can charge for usage, with card payment as an option, at all district council run facilities and will have a payback period of c. 1 year.

Investing in public conveniences assets

- 4.16 The Review Group identified that a number of facilities will, over time, require work to maintain condition, such as replacement doors and frames.
- 4.17 Bourton on the Water is the only location with more than one set of facilities where the Review Group suggests that both sets of facilities are retained, due to the high intensity of usage during peak tourism periods. There are paddle gates at the entrances to these facilities which require payment for users to pass through. The existing gates are very worn and damaged and no longer capable of repair. Investment is therefore needed to protect income at these high usage locations.

Recommendation 6 – That the Council allocates capital funding of £27,650 in priority works to remedy condition (the replacement of paddle gates) at the two sites in Bourton on the Water in order to protect future income, as set out in Annex B of the Review Group's report.

- 4.18 Whilst the Review Group noted that the overall the condition of facilities is good, they identified that some investment would be needed over time to maintain standards, particularly as there has been no specific investment in the facilities for 16 years.
- 4.19 It is therefore recommended that some funding is identified within the capital programme as part of the Building Maintenance Fund to enable prioritised and phased repairs and improvements.

Recommendation 7 – That the Council seeks to maintain the condition of its public convenience facilities through the Council's Asset Management Strategy.



Charging rates

- 4.20 Current charges, where they apply, are 40p per use. However, based on costs and usage, the net cost to the Council (subsidy) of each use ranges from 22p (Bourton on the Water, Church Rooms) to £2.31 (Fairford High Street).
- 4.21 The Review Group agreed that charges should be increased to reduce the gap between costs and income. Having discussed a range of charges from £0.50 to £1 it was agreed that 70p would be an appropriate charge. It was noted that charging 70p per use would not enable the service to break-even, but it would be expected to reduce the annual cost to the Council of providing the facilities. The Review Group assumes that a higher charge would not adversely impact usage rates, on the basis that users are already prepared to pay for using the facilities and will have the option to pay by card. Based on current usage a charge of 70p at all retained sites could potentially reduce the cost of the service by a maximum of £62,425 per annum.

Recommendation 8 – That usage charges are set at 70p at all retained district council public conveniences facilities. Based on current usage levels this could reduce the cost of the service by a maximum of £62,425 per annum.

- 4.22 The Review Group believes it is important that the Council explains to users why it is necessary to increase usage charges. A clear and transparent explanation of service costs, usage and income will increase understanding. The Review Group suggests that this is done by using signage at public convenience facilities.

Recommendation 9 – That the Council uses signage at public convenience facilities to explain to users that public conveniences are not a statutory service and the usage charge does not cover the full cost to the Council of running the service.

- 4.23 The Review Group recognises that quick and easy access to public conveniences is particularly important for certain groups such as disabled people, who may have specific medical needs and require more space and time to use facilities. The Review Group recommends that the Council continues to make a disabled access unit available at each site which can be accessed free of charge with a RADAR key.



Recommendation 10 – That the Council continues to provide one disabled access unit at each retained site which can be accessed free of charge with a RADAR key (Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation).

- 4.24 The Review Group noted the need to ensure that people can access up to date information about what public convenience facilities are available and where. The Review Group believes there is an opportunity to extend the number of facilities available to the public. Whilst a Community Toilet Scheme does not require users to purchase anything in the shops or hospitality venues that offer access, many businesses that offer their facilities do find that their business benefits as a result. There are also a number of public toilet apps that people can use and the Review Group suggests that key partner organisations and local businesses are encouraged to register their facilities on popular apps.

Recommendation 11 – That the Council encourages key partners such as town and parish councils and local businesses to make their toilets available for public use and to register their toilets on popular public toilet apps.

5. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 5.1 Cabinet is asked to agree its response to the recommendations and can choose to agree or disagree with each recommendation. Where the Review Group's recommendations have financial implications the Review Group have sought to be clear about this.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The provision of public conveniences currently has an annual revenue cost to the Council of £166,184.
- 6.2 The Group's proposals, set out in Exempt Annex B, would result in capital expenditure on priority works to remedy condition of £27,650. These works will help to protect future income. Capital expenditure of £47,200 is also recommended to install charging mechanisms at sites that are currently free to use (c. £34,000 has already been set aside for cashless payments). This capital expenditure is expected to have a payback period of 1 year.
- 6.3 Taken together the Review Group's recommendations would result in a net reduction in the annual cost of the service to the Council of up to £152,000 per annum from 2025/26 (subject to no reduction in service use as a result of the increase in the fee and additional capital expenditure to improve the remaining facilities).



7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Public conveniences are a discretionary service and therefore the Council could cease to provide the service.
- 7.2 The Council is the freeholder of all its public convenience buildings, except one which is leased. The Council can therefore choose to sell or repurpose buildings that it owns, subject to relevant permissions.

8. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 8.1 There is a risk that increased charges deters users and income therefore drops below the levels predicted. This could mean the net revenue position is worse than predicted.
- 8.2 The Council may suffer reputational damage from the closure of facilities and increasing charges. However, offering facilities to town councils in the first instance and providing signage to explain costs and charges will help mitigate this risk.

9. EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 9.1 The Review Group has considered the impacts of its recommendations on groups with protected characteristics, in particular disability and pregnancy and maternity. The Review Group recommends that the Council continues to provide at least one set of facilities in each town or village that currently has them, including at least one disabled access unit.

10. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 There are no notable climate or ecology implications identified. There may be a very small reduction in fuel usage from servicing and maintaining all existing facilities. However, as the proposals include retention of at least one set of facilities in each Town or Village, there will be limited reduction in travel for the contractor.
- 10.2 There will be a small reduction in utilities used as a result of any closures but as demand will transfer to the facilities being retained, it is likely the utility and consumable usage will also transfer.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 11.1 None.

(END)