



Report on Public Toilets Survey, 2016-17

Background

As part of the Coventry City Council consultation (“Connecting Communities”) on savings needed because of cuts in government funding, Proposal 9 referred to public conveniences located outside of the City centre. The proposal was that toilets in Earlsdon, Foleshill, Radford, Bell Green, Tile Hill and the Canal basin be closed. The public toilet in Cheylesmore area had already been closed. If all of these closures were to go ahead, this would leave only the two city centre public conveniences open.

The rationale and key messages of the proposal were as follows:

- The locations of the public conveniences outside of the City centre were a historical anomaly and did not reflect planned need of provision.
- Changes in social demographics made these places unattractive to visit.
- The toilets were small buildings for use by males, females and people with disabilities, free of charge. There was no usage data available at the time of the proposal as no footfall survey had been carried out (Coventry City Council Consultation paper, 16-11-2015).

The proposal again referred to changes in social demographics, such as an increase in the number of accessible public toilets in public and quasi-public buildings, and increased car usage, claiming that this made the facilities unattractive to visit by the general public. It also stated that the closure of the Cheylesmore facility provided evidence that the local community had managed without it.

In addition, it was said that over the course of the twelve months preceding the proposal, there were allegations of drugs use and of sex workers operating

at three of the locations. There was also a view that the facilities were not well used.

The expected financial savings as a result of the closure of these facilities was put at £50,000.00.

The potential impact of the closure of the facilities on service users was as follows:

- It was again stated that there was no usage data for the facilities.
- The groups that closure could impact on were: older people, children, pregnant women and people with disabilities.
- Included in this statement was a quote from a Help the Aged survey entitled “Nowhere to Go” from 2006, in which older people expressed their view that the lack of provision in local areas stopped them from leaving home as often as they would like, causing isolation.

Potential measures to mitigate the impact of the closures were described as follows:

- Seek local business/community sponsorship to keep toilets open and maintained.
- Take into consideration that there is already an increased number of accessible public toilets in public buildings (such as pubs, restaurants and churches).
- Collect/publish a directory of accessible toilets. However this would involve costs out of potential savings and commission to undertake the work.
- Provide signage at each of the locations.

Other alternatives were:

- Close and demolish present buildings.
- Encourage local business sponsorship.
- Permit local action groups to self-manage facilities (as outlined for the Cheylesmore area).
- Promote the need for sponsorship from businesses to make toilet provision generally available to the public.
- Provide a website and/or app with information about accessible toilets for the public.

Coventry Older Voices (COV)

At a meeting of COV in early 2016, members considered proposals for the closure of the six public toilets outside of the City centre, in addition to those closures inside and outside of the City centre that had already taken place. Concerns were also raised about poorly maintained toilets. Members felt that more closures would lead to the further isolation of older people, with many feeling unable to leave their homes, due to lack of facilities and knowledge of what or where alternatives facilities would be provided. There was concern that people might have to rely on the goodwill of local business, such as cafes, shops etc., allowing the general public to use their facilities.

There was concern raised regarding Coventry's status as an Age Friendly City (AFC), because one of the major themes that came across from AFC meetings was the isolation of older people, and hard to reach people, who felt trapped in their own homes.

COV members felt that as an organisation we had to raise the concerns of older people, and other disadvantaged groups, who would be particularly affected by the closure of public toilets.

To look at these concerns a sub committee was formed, with the remit of carrying out a survey of older people, and the likely impact of any closures in Coventry.

While members were preparing the questionnaire, it became clear that the closure of the six public toilets in the locations identified would take place, and they were all closed by April 2016, with at least one being demolished.

Since the closures, there does not appear to be any evidence of signposting of alternative provision, or indeed evidence that such alternative provision exists in these locations. We are not aware of any plans for the City Council to consult with businesses or community organisations about sponsorship to provide facilities, or of any plans for self- managed facilities. We do not know whether the aspiration to provide a self-managed facility in Cheylesmore has progressed.

This made COV members more determined to proceed with their own survey.

COV members, with the help of Age UK Coventry, looked at examples of surveys in other areas of the UK and finally drew up their own questionnaire to research the views of older people in the Coventry area. This was launched at

the COV AGM in September 2016. Questionnaires were also distributed on Older People's International Day in October 2016, on one day in the Bull yard, Coventry, and for one week in the reception area of AGE UK Coventry. Questionnaires were mailed to COV members, Age UK Friendship Groups, and to other groups of older people in Coventry, and were made available on the COV website.

A total of 121 questionnaires were returned by the closing date of 31st December 2016.

Some of the main points identified were:

- 96.7% of respondents thought that toilet closures would cause increased isolation of older people.
- This was reinforced by further comments such as: "causes anxieties", "worries for older people", "will be reluctant to leave home".
- On the maintenance and usage of toilets, 33.4% felt they not well maintained, 33.1% preferred to use facilities located inside buildings, and 28.9% were not sure where they were located, because they were not signposted.
- 75.2% said that they consider the availability and condition of toilets when going shopping, etc.
- 45.5% would only be prepared or are able to walk for few minutes (less than 5 minutes) to the nearest toilet.
- 91.7% felt facilities should be in major shopping areas, 90.1% in cafes, pubs, restaurants etc.
- 82.6% felt that facilities should be free to use.
- Although people agreed with facilities being available in retail premises, etc., there was also concern that they might be refused entry just to use them. They said that they would feel uncomfortable or embarrassed about this, or pressured into making a purchase in a shop or café, etc.
- On the question of who should provide public toilets, 71.9% stated the City Council; 48.8% local businesses, etc.
- 87.6% felt that improved signage was needed.

Conclusion.

Based on the survey findings, Coventry Older Voices hope that Coventry City Council will enter into a dialogue with COV and other interested parties on how to move forward with adequate provision of public toilets – both within the City centre and at locations outside of the City centre. This should also include provision at retail outlets etc., such as Central Six and Gallagher Retail Park. There has also been concern raised about the lack of facilities in some cemeteries in Coventry.

It is clear from the responses to the questionnaire that older people fear they can become isolated due to lack of facilities, (and there are also health-related issues). As Coventry is seeking to become an Age Friendly City and a City of Culture, we feel that the concerns of older people must be addressed, alongside those of other groups who are also particularly affected.

71.9% of the people surveyed feel that the City Council should be responsible for providing these facilities. However, 48.8% believe that local businesses, shops, stores etc., should also provide them, so this may be something that can be explored in addition to Council provision. However, if this route is to be taken, providers must make their facilities available to all groups, not just to customers. They would need to be suitable for use by all genders and people with disabilities etc., to be well maintained throughout, and well signposted. It should be noted that while their location could also be shown on the recently installed Information Totems, less than 50% of people surveyed knew what an information Totem was.

It is also important that the use of facilities should be free of charge where possible.

We note that there are a lot of development plans for the City at this time, for new retail outlets, café quarters, leisure etc., which hopefully will make Coventry more attractive for residents and visitors. We note that the café quarter in Cathedral Lanes is due to be expanded as a result of its popularity. The toilet that was inside Cathedral Lanes has been closed for some time. It is hoped that any plans for expansion would include the provision of toilet facilities. We believe that any such planning for development of public buildings and spaces should make such provision. As stated previously we have at least two retail parks in the Coventry area with no public toilet provision.

We hope that the Council, along with businesses and developers, will look seriously at these issues. We do not want Coventry to be, in the words of the 2006 Help the Aged study, a place of “NOWHERE TO GO!”