

REPORT TO THE CABINET

7 June, 2016

Cabinet Member: Councillor John Wynn Jones

Subject: Provision of Public Conveniences in Gwynedd

Contact Officer: Gwyn Morris Jones, Head of Highways and Municipal

Decision Sought

In accordance with the recommendation of the Communities Scrutiny Committee, to amend the decision made to cut £244,000 from the service by first seeking to establish partnerships with local communities in order to avoid closing the facilities whilst achieving the same amount of savings.

Introduction

Following the Gwynedd Challenge engagement exercise, the Council in its meeting of 3 March, 2016 recommended making cuts which included 'closing 50 out of 73 public toilets in the County' in order to achieve a budgetary reduction of £244,000.

The £244,000 cuts have to be achieved by 1 April, 2017 at the latest. With the assistance of the Head of Service, I have developed an alternative scheme to keep as many toilets as possible open whilst achieving the same amount of savings.

I put forward the alternative Scheme to the Communities Scrutiny Committee in its meeting of 19 May, 2016 (see Appendix 1 of this Report) in order to establish if there was support for the Scheme, and in order to obtain recommendations as to any improvements to the Scheme.

The Scrutiny Committee is supportive of the Scheme which relies on establishing partnerships with Town and Community Councils. The Committee also suggested improvements to the Partnership Scheme. The Scrutiny Committee recommends that the Cabinet amends its decision to cut £244,000 from the service by first giving an opportunity to implement this Scheme in order to achieve the same amount of savings.

Reasons for recommending the decision

If the closing of 50 out of 73 public toilets in the County were to be implemented, the decision as to which toilets to close would likely be based on an appraisal of the 'importance' of the toilets as developed by the Environment Committee Task Team in 2008/09.

In implementing the Partnership Scheme, there is a possibility, by having the support and co-operation of the Town and Community Councils, to keep a significant number of toilets open to the public in future despite the cuts to the relevant budget.

There are other advantages to the communities and this Council in implementing the Scheme e.g. the possibility of developing alternative arrangements for maintaining the provision in future; ensuring that the local community has influence in managing the provision, possibility of improving the facility in the future and providing better certainty of employment for staff that clean and maintain the provision.

Relevant considerations

The Scrutiny Committee recommended an arrangement where a set contribution of either £4000 or £2000 per annum is expected from Town and Community Councils (dependent on the toilet being open all year or seasonally).

The relevant partnerships have to be established in time for the contributions to be received at the beginning of the 2017/18 financial year and when the £244,000 cuts to the service are being made.

If there is no interest in entering into a partnership to maintain the provision, then it is expected that the toilet under consideration would close during this financial year, i.e. 2016/17.

The Scrutiny Committee also recommended:

- that there is a need to look again at the possibility of raising a charge on the use of toilets and which would help in meeting the cost of operating the toilets (there will be a need to advise Town and Community Councils interested in this matter).
- that there is a need to look further into means of extending the Welsh Government Grant Scheme for Community Toilets whereby businesses and community ventures receive a grant on allowing the public to use their toilets, and in order to increase the number of facilities available to the public.

Equality Assessment

Before making a decision, every individual in the public sector has a duty to consider the likely effect of the decision on people with characteristics protected by the equalities legislation (Equalities Act 2010). In presenting this saving to the Cabinet and Council in March, an equalities impact assessment was prepared and which identified the possible effect of the original scheme. This was taken into account in making the decision on the level of financial cuts. The assessment is included as an Appendix to this Report. The intention of this scheme is to provide Community Councils with the opportunity to maintain public conveniences in their area. This is again an attempt to mitigate the possible effect of the cuts on public provisions. The Cabinet will receive a further report on this issue in October and when the equality assessment will be reviewed when deliberating means of progressing matters and in reaching a decision on any further steps necessary to achieve the savings.

Public Health Bill

There are indications from the Government that this Bill has not entirely disappeared and could therefore re-appear with the need for a strategy for operating and providing public conveniences. Pragmatically, it can be predicted that the need for a contractual arrangement would be sufficient to ensure a long term commitment from Community Councils. There is a need to avoid risks with scenarios such as when the strategy identifies the need for a toilet at a location that does not attract the support or commitment of the Community Council for its provision.

Next steps and timetable

On receiving the approval of the Cabinet on seeking to implement the Partnership Scheme first, the relevant Department will consult with the Town and Community Councils to establish if there is support for the Scheme. Because of the need to achieve the cuts by 1 April, 2017 it will be necessary to confirm matters regarding this Scheme by September, 2016.

It is anticipated, therefore, that an update on the matter will be provided to the Cabinet in its scheduled meeting of 4 October, 2016.

Opinion of the Statutory Officers

Chief Executive:

This Report provides details of an alternative scheme to achieve the cuts the Council is committed to. It is a proposal which, upon the support of the town and community councils, would be a means of safeguarding provision in the community whilst achieving the necessary savings for the Council. I can see from the Report that the Scrutiny Committee has welcomed this development subject to certain suggestions. Obviously, the discussions with community councils will be key for this to be successful.

Monitoring Officer:

Subsequent to the Council's decision in March to reduce the public conveniences budget, this report offers a scheme that can be a means of achieving the savings whilst reducing the effect on the provision in the County. The contractual financial model also offers a flexible and practical means of working in partnership to keep the provision without having to deal with complications that may arise in any formal transfer of the asset. Obviously, there is a need to establish robust and long term contractual arrangements in order to achieve the scheme's aims.

Chief Finance Officer:

I welcome this alternative scheme involving partnerships with Town and Community Councils. This would enable the provision to be kept open in addition to maintaining employment for cleaning staff. I note that the timetable allows for the Town and Community Councils to adjust their precepts between now and January in time for 2017/18. No doubt all Town and Community Councils will take advantage of this opportunity to keep all the facilities open, but it does offer another way of achieving the £244k savings already agreed upon as part of the 'Gwynedd Challenge' savings and financial strategy for 2016/17 – 2017/18.
