

12 February 2015

Petition: Willenhall toilets

Ward(s) Willenhall South

Portfolios: Councillor L Jeavons, Environment and Transport

Executive Summary:

A petition was submitted to Council at its meeting on 22 September 2014.

The petition, "Willenhall toilets protest", submitted by Councillor S Coughlan, has over 500 signatures and is worded as follows:

"We, the undersigned, request that Walsall Council reinstate the public toilets in Willenhall town for the use of traders, shoppers and visitors to this great town of ours."

The public toilets in Willenhall were closed as part of the Council's approved budget savings for the financial year 2014/15, along with public toilets in Aldridge, Blakenall, Brownhills and Rushall.

Many of these facilities were in poor condition and required substantial investment to bring them up to standard; unfortunately however, there was no funding available for such work. The poor condition of the toilets created an atmosphere of neglect, discouraged public use for the purposes intended and attracted anti-social behaviour, graffiti and criminal damage. This, in turn, increased maintenance costs including the regular replacement of consumables and equipment such as toilet seats. The combined effect of these factors had reduced usage to very low levels.

In view of the condition of the property and the availability of alternative facilities available to the public some 235 metres away at Morrisons supermarket, the proposal to close and demolish the conveniences was accepted. The toilets in Willenhall were demolished in the Summer of 2014 required.

Included in the draft budget being presented to Council on 26 February 2015, is a proposal to close the public toilets at Pelsall.

No funding is currently available to construct new toilets or to maintain and clean them.

Reason for Scrutiny:

The Council's petitions scheme states that where a petition contains at least 500 signatories, the relevant senior officer will give evidence at a public meeting of one of the Council's scrutiny and performance panels. The Authority has determined that the response to such petitions must be given by either the Chief Executive, Executive Directors, Assistant Directors or Heads of Service. The Committee may also decide to call the relevant portfolio holder to attend the meeting.

Recommendation:

That:

1. The Panel note the content of the petition.

Background Papers:

- Corporate budget plan and Treasury Management and Investment Strategy report to Council, 21 February 2013
- Question to Council, Council minutes 22 September 2014

Resource and Legal Considerations:

The provision and maintenance of toilets in public places is at the discretion of local authorities who have a **power**, under section 87 of the Public Health Act 1936, to provide public conveniences, but **no duty** to do so. Whether or not local authorities choose to provide these facilities is at their discretion and needs to be weighed in the balance against other local service demands.

The public toilets in Willenhall were closed as part of the Council's approved budget savings for the financial year 2014/15. The closure of the toilets achieved a revenue saving of £24,000 per annum in addition to annual business rates of £2,130.

At the time of closure, the public toilets in Willenhall were in need of significant investment, with redecoration, replacement downpipes and overflows, gutter clearance and minor roof repairs required. No formal quotes for the outstanding works were obtained but the cost of approaching £15,000 appeared to be reasonable. The demolition cost was £12,000.

There is no funding currently available for the construction of new public toilets. With ongoing spending pressures providing a significant challenge for the foreseeable future, it is highly unlikely that proposals will come forward to construct new public toilets in Willenhall or elsewhere in the borough.

Citizen Impact:

Consultation in late 2013 showed that residents generally agreed that public toilets were 'grotty' and 'disgusting'. Many believed that shutting them was the right thing to do in order to save money as alternatives were available near by.

However, consultation also showed that public toilets were seen as an important service for older people, people with disabilities and families. Some respondents suggested that, rather than close them, the Council should perhaps improve them and keep them open. With regard to Willenhall in particular, closing the toilets was perceived to be a particular problem on market days.

Environmental Impact:

At the time of closure, the public toilets in Willenhall were unattractive both inside and out, did not impact positively on the visual amenity of the local area and attracted anti-social behaviour. With the toilet building removed, this made it possible to expand the parking provision in the Market Place car park.

Performance Management:

Not applicable to this report

Equality Implications:

Due to the nature of the service, it was difficult to quantify usage in detail and to gather a breakdown of public convenience users by equality groups. However, from a number of surveys carried out with the public around shopping habits in district and local centres, it is apparent that they mainly attract local residents who travel very short distances from their homes.

Consultation:

Public consultation undertaken as part of the overall consultation on the budget savings options in late 2013 showed significant support for the proposed closures. However, some respondents did raise concerns about the effect they felt that the closures would have on older people, the disabled and those with young children.

Some respondents also seemed apprehensive about using alternative facilities available within nearby venues.

The alternatives, all of which were of a higher standard, included extended opening hours, regular spot checks and facilities for disabled people.

Contact Officer:

Keith Stone

Assistant Director, Neighbourhood Services

01922 654618