

Closure of Public Toilets in Cornwall

On April 16th Cornwall Council will close the Sennen Cove Harbour toilets unless a local body can be found to continue their operation. Other toilets from around the county face similar closure. Some have already been taken on by town or city councils, paid for by increases in the precept.

In the rural areas this business model does not work. Even raising the precept by a significant amount will not cover the running of the public toilets. Cornwall Council either does not appreciate this or simply does not care.

In 2008 a Cornish MP (Andrew George) sat on a select committee that stated, *"It has been shown that increased public toilet provision is not a bottomless pit or a drain on resources but rather it increases the economic turnover of an area in terms of the business case (as shown by studies by the Association of Town Centre managers inter alia. As the Americans say, "Bathrooms mean business" better public toilets brings in more business, more tourists, more customers who can stay longer and spend more."*

It is our view that Cornwall Council has orchestrated a cynical and divisive approach to the closure of the county's toilets.

From a statement in the newspaper in November we were led to expect that all the toilets would be financed for a further season. We are now told that the toilets will close much earlier than anticipated. The timing seems to have been deliberately set to coincide with the end of the first busy part of the year as if to demonstrate their necessity.

The detailed running costs demonstrate that significant savings could have been achieved through efficiencies and working with the communities affected. Instead the council has decided to use what can only be described as bully-boy tactics, duress and threats.

The council knows that the issue will be more keenly felt at the point of use, in the local communities that the toilets serve. By threatening closure mid-season additional pressure on the local community is brought to bear. We believe that this is a cynical move and should be resisted.

We should not be reacting to these threats by making knee-jerk decisions to take on responsibility for these toilets at local level without due consideration. Cornwall Council needs to step back from this precipice and allow due process to be performed.

We now know that notice had been given privately to the Harbour Commission in the expectation that they would be the only interested party. This is no longer the case and it has been suggested that local businesses be asked to contribute to the running of the toilets.

Time is required, first to identify all the appropriate stakeholders and secondly for a sensible and inclusive strategy to be developed and discussed. We propose that Cornwall Council recant the current closures and continue with its commitment to operate and maintain the toilets until the end of the

2012 season. This will provide sufficient time for a proper discussion to take place, including the appropriate stakeholders, on the future operation of the toilets under threat. The scope of these discussions should not only include the ordered transition of toilet management to local communities but also more efficient running under the current management, Cornwall Council.

Sennen Cove has raised a petition over the Easter period to demonstrate to the council the weight of public opinion against the move to close the Sennen Cove Harbour car park toilets. We understand that Cornwall Council will only recognise signatures from people living in Cornwall. We contend that this is unrealistic and unrepresentative of the cross-section of people who actually use these facilities; the people of Cornwall will generally have their own toilets. Do our visitors, who are most affected by this decision and provide necessary income to the county, have no say in the matter?

We close this argument with the conclusion reached by the Communities and Local Government Committee in its report on The Provision of Public Toilets.

They wrote,

“In the final analysis, “all human life is there” toilets affect every aspect of our lives, and also are relevant to all aspects of government policy-making. In summary public toilet provision is necessary to the following factors:

*Sustainable cities
Healthy communities
Transport planning
Spatial planning
Accessibility
Social Equality
Gender mainstreaming
Ethnic and religious equality
Economic prosperity
Toilet provision has major implications
Social
Economic
Political
Environmental
Physical*

If we really had an equal society public toilets would be provided without question. It is not a matter just of money it is a matter of political priorities and social awareness.”

Let us not be ashamed among the nations of the world because we are so mean that the government won't even provide for its people's most basic needs, dignity and comfort.”

Andrew and Sharon Carne
The Old Boathouse, Sennen Cove.