



Briefing 17/17      April 2017

## APSE Survey – Public Conveniences

To: All APSE Contacts

### Key Issue

- APSE Solutions was engaged by a member authority to conduct a review of the council's public toilet provision. As part of the review, a UK wide survey was conducted to gain a wider understanding of the current position in relation to the facilities that local authorities provide.
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### 1. Overview

APSE working with a member authority has conducted a Public Conveniences survey to gain a clear understanding of the current position and the approaches to provision that local authorities are undertaking. APSE created a short survey that was circulated to members UK wide and a total of 196 responses were received.

The survey focused on four key areas: -

- current provision;
- income generation;
- temporary and alternative provision; and
- strategy for provision.

This briefing outlines the main findings from the survey.

### Results of the survey

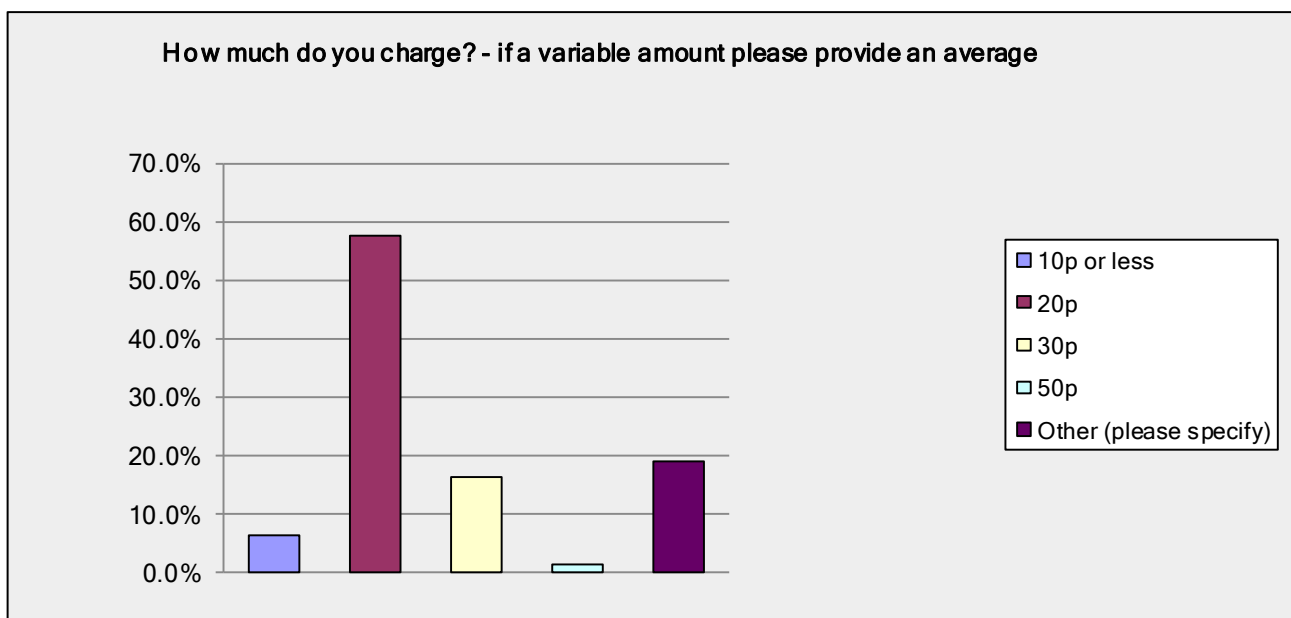
Local authorities in England and Wales have a power but not a duty, to provide toilets for the use by the public under the Public Health Act 1936. APSE wanted to know if local authorities provide public conveniences and asked, '**Does the council provide and maintain permanent public conveniences?**' A vast majority of respondents, (91.3%) confirmed this was the case with only 8.7% of councils answering 'no.'

APSE was keen to establish the number of facilities each council provided and maintained. Question two asked, '**How many permanent facilities does your council provide and maintain?**' Over 50% of authorities reported that they provided and maintained more than 10 facilities while 48% of respondents were split evenly with 24% stating that they provided and maintained between one and five whilst the remaining 24% provided and maintained between six and 10 facilities.

Public conveniences could attract an income for the authority, through charging an entry fee, advertising and the 1936 Act (as amended in 2008), makes provision for local authorities to charge for sanitary facilities including lavatories. The next questions focused on the income that authorities generated from these assets and the survey asked **'Do you earn advertising or sponsorship income from public conveniences?'** Out of the authorities that responded to the question, a significant majority (94.7%) reported that they did not raise income in this way. With only two respondents reporting that they did earn an income from advertising or sponsorship.

This was followed by a question in relation to charging for making use of the facilities. Over half of respondents (56.7%) confirmed that they did not charge for any of their provision, while 30% charged for some of their public conveniences and a small number, 13.3% charged for most or all of their public conveniences.

APSE was keen to gain information ascertaining to the average charge levied by the authorities and asked, **'How much do you charge? – if a variable amount please provide an average.'** The most popular cost for public conveniences was 20p with just under 60% of respondents reporting charging this amount. The graph below outlines the range of charges levied for public conveniences.



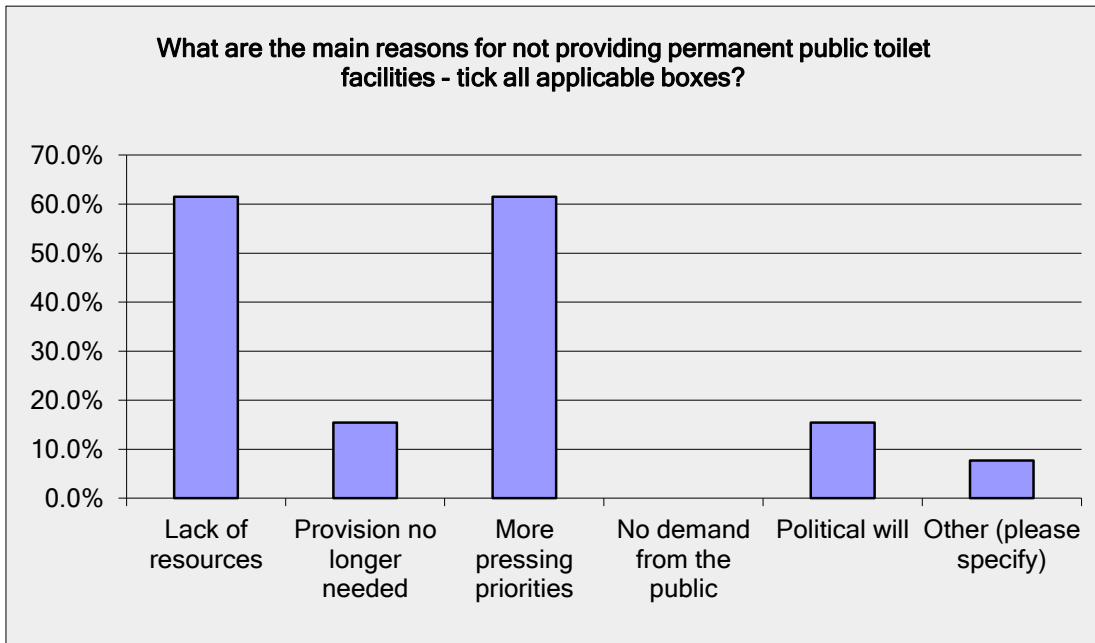
Out of the authorities who levied a charge for their public conveniences, APSE wanted to gain an understanding of the income that was generated from this provision. There were 64 responses to this question, the responses were varied and wide ranging, some respondents stated that the question was not applicable and they generated no income or the figure was unknown. Which contrasted with one authority which reported that they generated an income of approximately £50K per annum. It is not possible to draw too many conclusions from the responses due to a number of factors such as the type, location of provision and cost charged per visit. What is evident from the responses is that the income generated is low and may only be enough to cover the costs of providing the provision, maintaining it and collecting the revenue.

Just under 10% of respondents to the survey reported that they did not provide any public conveniences. The next section of the survey focused on the reasons for a local authority opting to remove provision.

APSE asked, **'When did the council cease providing the provision?'** The majority of authorities

(46.2%) reported that they removed the provision three or more years ago, with 23% of authorities removing the provision more than two years ago. In addition, 15.4% stated that they had ceased providing public toilets more than a year ago and 15.4% reported that they had ceased providing provision within the last year.

To gain an understanding of why authorities were removing provision the question was posed, **‘What are the main reasons for not providing permanent public toilet facilities,’** the two main reasons reported were a lack of resources and more pressing priorities. The graph below outlines the responses given.



It was noted that none of the respondents reported that the reason was due to lack of demand, whilst 61.5% reported that the decision to cease providing provision was due to lack of resources and more pressing priorities, indicating that the reduction in provision is linked to the need for councils to operate with severely reduce budgets.

APSE was keen to establish if local authorities where providing alternative public convenience provision and the next section of the survey focused on alternative provision. Question ten asked, **‘Do you provide temporary toilets?’** the majority of respondents (58.3%)reported that they did not provide temporary provision with 28.8% reporting that they did provide temporary provision occasionally and 12.8% reporting that there was temporary provision in place.

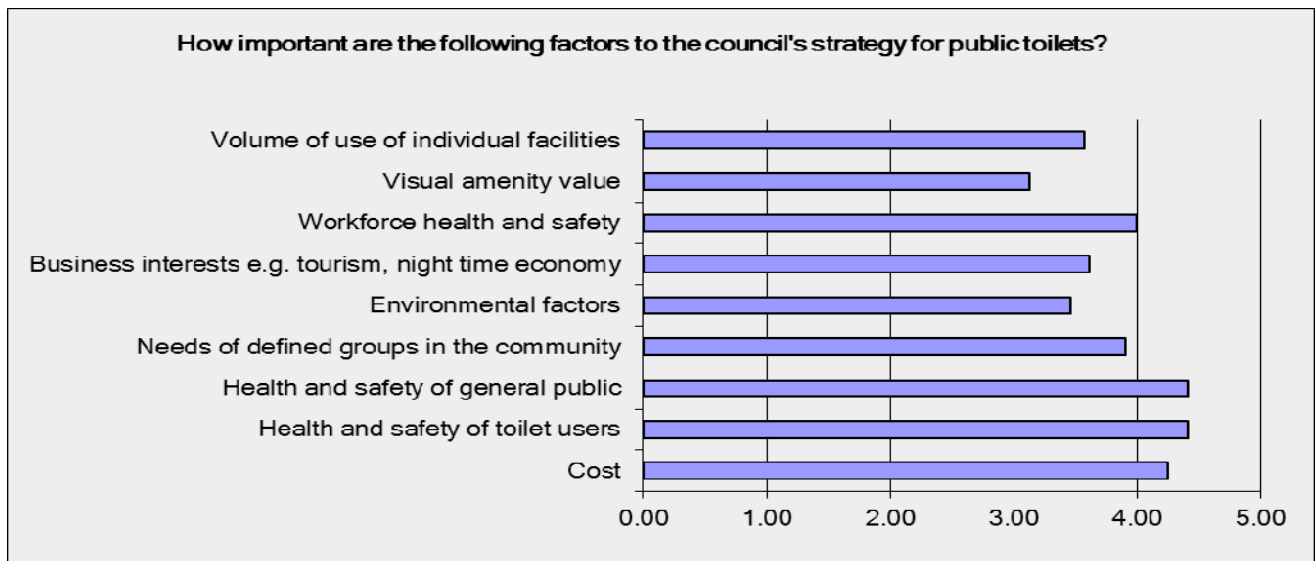
In additional to temporary provision, APSE wanted to gain an understanding of alternative arrangements that councils have developed to provide public toilets and queried, **‘Has the council developed alternative arrangements for public toilet provision?’** Business Improvement District schemes provided the least provision according to respondents with the largest alternative arrangements being provided by town and parish councils at 45%, whilst 40% of provision was provided through local food and retail outlets. With 27.5% of the alternative delivery being provided by pubs and clubs and 28.8 % being provided by other methods.

The next section of the survey focused on the future, APSE was keen to establish what plans local authorities had in place and if they had an adopted strategy. Question 12 asked, **‘Are you planning on reducing, increasing, retaining the current level of provision in the next few years?’** In response 49.4% of the 154 respondents reported that they were looking at maintaining the current level of provision, with 27.9% stating that they would reduce provision and 21.4% not knowing what they were intending on doing. Only 1.3% were

planning on increasing the provision. Councils were then asked if they had a formally agreed strategy in place for public conveniences.

From the 135 respondents 34.1% stated they did not have a strategy in place, 25.2% reported that they did not have one yet, 21.5% did not know if there was a strategy in place and 19.3% stated that they had a strategy in place.

APSE was keen to establish what factors were important to the council’s strategy for public toilets and asked respondents to state whether a particular factor was, not at all important; a little important; quite important; important or highly important. There were 109 responses received and an average rating was calculated, the table below outlines the average rating for each of the factors.



The most important factors were noted as being the health and safety of the general public and the health and safety of toilet users followed by cost, with the least important factors being visual amenity.

**APSE comment**

APSE would like to thank our members for continuing to share information through our network query service and surveys. The withdrawal and reductions in provision have occurred within the last three years. This coupled with the lack of resources and more pressing priorities being cited as the main reasons for the reduction, suggests that there is a direct correlation between the reduction in provision and austerity.

Charging for facilities is a way for local authorities to maintain provision. However, the practicalities of implementing a system for charging can add additional costs and the responses received from the survey demonstrate that in the majority of cases charging barely covers the costs of providing public conveniences therefore is not a means of income generation.

Councils have specific obligations with regard to equalities and whilst the provision of public conveniences is discretionary, their closure or the imposition of charges may have a disproportionate impact on people with protected characteristics.

APSE is concerned that local authorities are closing public conveniences due to the absence of a statutory requirement to provide provision and the need to make savings. Decisions are being taken without a council strategy being in place with 59.3% of respondents reporting that they did not currently have a strategy in place.

Good toilet provision has been shown to increase retail turnover, tourist numbers and economic growth. APSE believes that there are opportunities available to councils that will enable them to maintain good provision. Only two of the respondents to the survey reported that sponsorship and advertising were a way of generating income. This is despite the majority of councils reporting that they did not have a policy in place to prevent advertising of this nature, therefore this is one option that could be explored to generate income or make providing provision cost neutral. In addition to charging, councils can look at options for delivering the provision in alternative ways including utilising the powers under miscellaneous licensing provisions and building regulations; working with local businesses to introduce a joint scheme; the transfer the public conveniences to community groups and town and parish councils; utilising Section 106 Planning Obligations; and proactively working with Business Improvement Districts who can act as a vehicle to increase provision.

There are a range of options available to councils that need to be taken into consideration prior to removing provision and councils should implement a clear strategy to assess each of the facilities, ensuring that opportunities are identified and options explored before a valuable community asset is lost.

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