

Hang on until October – council says it would cost £152,000 to reopen the remaining public toilets

The council says it would cost them £152,000 to reopen the remainder of the 21 public toilets it owns, with the exception of three which it says would require ‘significant improvements’.

Councillors have decided today not to reopen any more than the seven already back in business, and are not due to consider this matter again until October.

Public toilets were all closed in March 2020 due to the pandemic, and only seven of those have reopened. On reopening toilets have to be cleaned more thoroughly and more often, and measures to restrict how many people use them at any one time have to be put in place. All of these measures are essential to conform to the public health guidance issued by The Scottish Government. As well as this, the council is of the view that the age and design of the council-owned toilets means that the risk of virus transmission is increased.

Lothian have reported difficulties for their bus drivers while the toilets along bus routes remain closed, and there have been difficulties in the Pentland Hills Regional Park while neither of the toilets at Harlaw or Flotterstone are open.

There are difficulties in reopening all of the council owned

premises, some operational and some financial. The Director of Place, Paul Lawrence, said that there is simply no budget to cover this. That particular directorate is already over budget in any case. The council has a £19 million funding gap in its overall budget. Some toilets had been opened for longer than their advertised hours in the past few weeks, but the staff who cleaned them were agency staff who worked on a voluntary basis. At present all public toilets which are functioning are open from 11am to 6pm seven days a week. One member of staff is required at each to maintain public safety.

The political parties were united in that they do want the public toilets to reopen as soon as possible, but all accepted that it is not possible at this time. Council Leader Adam McVey said that he hoped businesses would provide alternatives in cafés and shops. He said: "If people do use the facilities in any of these businesses I would hope that they will spend more than a penny there. I think that business case is very strong."

The report set down before councillors was noted and approved along with Green party additions asking for some of the toilets which are already open to stay open longer if possible. The Greens also requested that the council works with the police asking them to intervene to stop those people who are 'caught short'. There have been many reports of anti-social behaviour at the beach and near parks. It is an offence to urinate in public, and the Greens said this is still a problem. They also want clearer signage within half a mile of all the toilets which are open. Cllr Melanie Main explained that the report did contain have all the information it should have had. She said: "This report should have included the costings for reopening individual toilets. It must be contained in the next report. Public toilets are important for families and the elderly."

The Liberal Democrats wanted the council to spend the pennies and get public toilets reopened as soon as possible with a

review at October this year. Cllr Hal Osler said: "I must reiterate the importance of these. I appreciate the cost but we must think of the public health impact." Earlier in the meeting it was mentioned that there is a council policy to ask business to step into the breach to provide toilets for the public, but Cllr Osler said she was uncomfortable in asking small businesses to 'provide facilities that we are not prepared to provide'. Liberal Democrat Cllr Gloyer said that there are some people for whom going out is impossible without public toilets available.

The Conservatives asked for some areas prioritised such as Stockbridge, Colinton, and Harlaw Visitor Centre, more signage and wanted council officers to open as many more public toilets as they can while meeting the public health risk.

The public toilets which are now open include Pipe Lane in Portobello, Hope Park in the Meadows; Ross Bandstand in Princes Street Gardens, the Courtyard at Saughton Park, Bruntsfield Links, Hawes Pier, South Queensferry, and Cramond.