

Planning Statement

New Public Toilets for Bognor Regis Seafront

The need for new seafront toilets

The seafront is the jewel in the crown of Bognor Regis. The town is a tourist destination as well as a lovely place to live, and both tourists and residents like Bognor Regis because of the seafront and beach, and it is a busy place on a sunny day. Although the Council has no legal requirement to provide public toilets and is indeed rationalising this provision, there is an approved identified priority to provide safe and easily accessible beachside toilets for the many visitors that come to the seafront. The nearest other public toilets are across the (busy) Esplanade road within the Regis car park. This is clearly not ideal if you have to pack up the whole family beach outing just to take a small child across the road to go to the toilet.

To increase the turnover and support businesses on the seafront and wider town centre, adopted regeneration strategy and policy aims to encourage more visitors to come to Bognor Regis more often, to stay longer and spend more. It is in the interest of the town's economy that visitors to the beach have a good experience of Bognor Regis as this is likely to make them want to come back again and to visit more often, and that experience includes toilets.

The public actively disliked the previous underground toilets as evidenced by 3 public surveys carried out over the last 8 years with people (both residents and visitors) on the seafront where better toilets were the highest priority. It is interesting to note that the temporary Portaloo toilets in place on the promenade during summer 2017 have generated a lot of unsolicited positive feedback from members of the public to Foreshores officers and others, indicating the public desire for, and enjoyment of a better toilet experience.

In summer 2016, both Arun DC's Bognor Regis Regeneration Sub Committee and Full Council supported the delivery of the new public toilets on the promenade as the highest priority project within the package of initiatives that was approved as part of the Seafront Delivery Plan Report. Additionally when Arun DC Cabinet and Full Council made capital funds available over 3 years for the improvement of public toilets across the district, they too identified the new promenade toilets as the highest priority.

The construction of the toilet building has secured funded as described above and will be built as soon as possible subject to planning approval. The new Beach Office (Foreshores building) is not currently funded.

Underground toilets

The now-closed underground toilets were not DDA compliant and were inaccessible to the key visitor groups to the seafront, i.e. families with small children and older people. People with pushchairs or mobility difficulties could not use them. There was no feasible method of making them accessible; ramps at the required shallow angles would be very long, and a lift in the harsh seafront location would not be economically or operationally viable or sustainable.

The underground toilets had to be closed when they flooded in the winter. This issue generated high maintenance and cleansing costs, and meant that the toilet environment was unpleasantly damp and smelly even in the summer.

Being out of the public eye, the underground facilities were subject to regular vandalism and criminal damage, and used for antisocial behaviour and criminal activity. Manning the toilets during opening hours in order to oversee behaviour is considered to be cost prohibitive. It is interesting to note that the recent temporary toilets did not suffer any of these problems whatsoever which bodes well for the new toilets.

The underground toilets are now permanently closed and will not be reopened for the reasons stated above.

Location

There have been toilets in this vicinity on the promenade for many years, well before the modern flats at Berkeley Court and Esplanade Grande opposite were built. The heavily-used accessible toilet in the Foreshores Office was installed in 1992, so the use of this area of the promenade for beach toilet provision is not new.

The broad location for the new toilets was agreed in principle by Arun DC Full Council in July 2016 as part of the Seafront Delivery Plan decisions.

The toilets and Beach Office need to be around the centre of the most heavily used section of the promenade between Butlin's and the pier to provide cover for all beach users across this area. This location is broadly in the middle of this area.

The toilets need to be close to the Stalls Zone where the main cluster of improved permanent and temporary catering outlets will be located. The Stalls Zone is the widest part of the promenade, and the toilet location sits at the eastern edge of that Zone to leave the wider parts of the promenade available for new catering and other commercial outlets.

Direct access is required to the main sewer system for both buildings. The sewer runs westwards along The Esplanade from Gloucester Road and turns inland at Clarence Road, so the toilets must be located east of Clarence Road. It would be impractical and extremely costly to locate the buildings away from the main sewer.

The new toilets will be the same distance, or further away than the previous toilet provision in respect to the buildings on the land side of the Esplanade. The closest point is around 22m away, thus there would be no disturbance in terms of noise, smell etc, and no loss of privacy or being overlooked. The level of footfall and pedestrian traffic generated by the new toilets will be similar to that for the previous toilet provision.

The Foreshore Office location chosen for these buildings was previously suggested by residents of Esplanade Grande opposite to be a good location for the new toilets. It is clear in this instance that Council officers have listened and taken note of suggestions by the community.

Many residents of the apartments opposite this site objected to the planning application. It must be remembered that a seafront promenade, and homes close to it, will experience many visitors, noise, people and events, day and night, all year round. The clear policy of all local councils is to increase visitor numbers to Bognor Regis, the time they spend there, and to improve all facilities for beach and seafront visitors whether they are residents or tourists, so there will hopefully be more people visiting the seafront in the future. Bognor Regis seafront has been a popular visitor destination for over 100 years, and it is hoped this will continue into the future.

Seafront views

The toilets and Beach Office buildings are replacing a larger and taller building with a pitched roof (Foreshores Office) that is out of scale for the narrow promenade, so actually will improve the open sea views. The footprint area of the two buildings is less than the existing Foreshores Office, and they are not as tall. The combined buildings are slightly longer east to west than the existing building, but there is plenty of room in this axis.

The size and shape of the buildings was restricted to suit the long thin nature of the promenade, and the scale and mass of the buildings was reduced to improve the all-important seafront views.

Width of the promenade

The new buildings are not as wide as the existing Foreshores building, so will create more room than there is now for the train, pedestrians etc.

Pedestrians and cyclists etc are protected from toilet doors opening into the flow of traffic by the barriers.

Toilet provision

There are four unisex cubicles, two of which have baby change facilities, as does the disabled cubicle which is accessed in the normal way via a radar key. To provide extra capacity and faster throughput for the busy times, there is also a separate area with 2 male-only urinals.

The space for the new toilets on the promenade is limited by several factors. The long and thin nature of the promenade restricts the shape of the building, and the desire to improve the open seafront views that beach visitors come to see restricts the size and height of the building. This limits the number of toilets that can be provided. For this reason, unisex provision has been chosen for these toilets as it provides the greatest toilet usage capacity for the number of cubicles.

Unisex means the toilet can be used by anyone rather than having separate male and female facilities with shared hand-wash facilities. A unisex toilet is like a domestic toilet in that it is used by everyone in the home. For the seafront toilets, each cubicle is self-contained behind a lockable door to the outside of the building, and has its own hand-wash facility.

Unisex provision is a normal form of modern public toilet provision and is found widely across the UK as public toilets (including in Chichester where their busiest city centre public toilets located in Little London are unisex) and in commercial premises

such as shops (M & S) and many cafes/restaurants. This is especially true for places with a high volume of toilet use.

Unisex provision has been adopted in this design, and more widely for many reasons. It reduces the space required because, by allowing anyone to use any toilet, it means quicker throughput during busy periods and results in less queuing, particularly for women and is considered to be Industry good practice. There is also emerging evidence that shared unisex toilet provision reduces vandalism and anti-social behaviour as there are no communal areas for people to gather out of the public eye.

A question was raised about coaches parking on the Esplanade to allow their passengers to use the toilets, however the Esplanade at this location is not suitable for coach parking, and there is a dedicated coach parking bay outside the pier-head toilets further west on the Esplanade.

Design Style

The design brief was for a high quality modern style that would stand the test of time, using materials that will look good over time in the harsh marine environment. The buildings needed to complement the style of buildings locally and blend in with the stunning natural backdrop of the seafront rather than standing out.

The buildings in vicinity of the site are all modern apartment blocks in varying design styles. The emerging concept designs for the planned redevelopment of the Regis Site and Winter Gardens are again modern, with a strong emphasis on curves. The new building designs reflect this.

There was a desire in some quarters for the buildings to be faux-Victorian in style and for them to match the “heritage” of the Foreshores Building. The Foreshores Office was built in 1992 around an existing concrete beach shelter, and the Victorian-style finishes were applied at that time. This building is now at the end of its economic life; the concrete structure and building finishes have deteriorated and costs ratepayers £1000's each year to maintain. Current architectural thinking is that all faux-styled buildings dilute the impact of the real remaining Victorian and Edwardian buildings in the town. Faux Victoriana now looks dated and old-fashioned which is at odds with Bognor Regis' vision to be a modern 21st century seaside resort that respects its heritage.

The buildings must fit within the narrow confines of the prom without constraining the movement of train, pedestrians etc, and is smaller and shorter than the existing Foreshores building which is out of scale and intrusive for this sensitive location.

As the buildings sit on top of the sea-defence, they have to be of lightweight construction resting and secured onto an engineered structural base. The promenade is predominantly a pedestrian space, so vehicle movements to service, clean and maintain the buildings must be minimised. Therefore toilet building sanitary-ware and all internal fittings will be high quality, attractive, robust and designed to be easy to clean, service and maintain.

The appointed architect for the design work, Space+Place, is an established multiple award-winning architectural practice with experience of similar contracts. The proposed designs fully meet the brief in all respects. Officers from several departments across the council have used their extensive knowledge and experience about what works well with public toilets and what doesn't to ensure the designs are fully developed in all aspects.

The toilet and hand-wash systems chosen for the toilets are fully integrated into the walls, and are serviced from the rear service area. All finishes are designed for heavy use and to survive the salt, wind, sand and shingle that come with this location. To reduce the on-site construction time at this busy and constrained location, the building is manufactured off-site by a British company, and craned in for attachment to the fixing points and final assembly.

The toilet building will be the first new building delivered on the seafront, and will set the quality and style standard for those that follow. It is not a standard rectangular council-style toilet block; it is an attractive and bespoke design that reflects the Council's ambition for this iconic seafront location. This does mean that the building is more expensive than a standard toilet block, but the council is prepared to invest more to deliver the quality of building that the future Bognor Regis needs and deserves.

The previous design included a "modesty screen" on the road-side of the building, however as the toilet doors are now on the other side of the building, the need for this screen has been dispensed with.

Other issues

The current Foreshores Building houses some weather monitoring equipment owned by Bognor Regis Town Council. Early liaison with their officers has enabled this to be relocated to join other equipment already in place on the roof at Butlin's. It also hosts free seafront Wi-Fi equipment provided under a grant from Bognor Regis Town Council. As far as possible this will be accommodated within the new toilet building.

Consultation

The new buildings falls within "Permitted Development" which means under planning law, that planning permission was not required for this work. Arun DC chose to put the project through the planning system for transparency and to enable the public to have their say.

The decision to locate new toilets in this vicinity was not new; it had been in the public domain for over a year, and had been approved in principle by Members elected by the local community as their democratically chosen representatives. The feedback from the apartments opposite that the Foreshores Office location should be used for the new toilets was taken on board and implemented.

In the initial planning application, there was a dislike of the toilet doors being positioned facing the road. Although there are no planning reasons to change this, and many logistical reasons to have the door facing north, the council has listened to the public concerns. The revised designs have changed the toilet doors to the sea-facing side although this presents additional design and operational issues that need

mitigation. Another small design change from the original design is to omit the high level clerestory glazing under the wave-form roof as it will not provide natural light to the cubicles, and replace it with solid panels which will reduce both maintenance and weathering.

Similar scale unisex toilet projects have been designed and delivered by Arun DC Property and Estates elsewhere in the district. None of the 70+ objections raised for the original planning application had any basis within planning law, however the application was deferred, and revised plans have been submitted here.

The same pattern of mass objections arose with a 2015 planning application for a new, high quality all year round seafront concession kiosk in this locality, the Coffee Cup. The initial planning application similarly attracted many non-planning objections and was refused. The resubmitted planning application was approved. The Coffee Cup is now located opposite the apartments, and is very popular with visitors to the seafront, and has driven up the quality of catering on the seafront.

Conclusions

As stated previously, the seafront is the jewel in the crown of Bognor Regis, and is one of the main reason tourists visit the town. Arun DC and Bognor Regis Town Council both have adopted strategy and policy (Masterplan, Seafront Strategy, Seafront Delivery Plan, Neighbourhood Plan to name but a few) that aim to increase visitor numbers and dwell time, and aim to attract a higher-spending visitor to the town. All adopted strategy and policy is based on wide and independent public consultation, and strategy and policy directly reflect what the public have said they want.

One of the key methods identified to achieve these aims is to improve the quality of all facilities on the seafront, and more high quality new buildings are planned for the future.