

Appendix 4 Detailed comments from Consultees.

1. Comments in respect of the Toilets at Cooling.

1.1 Comments from Cooling Parish Council (CPC.) :

We are writing to formally object to Medway Council's proposed possible closure of the public toilets in Cooling. This decision would have a profoundly negative impact on both residents and the many visitors who come to the village each year. Given the rural nature of our village and the vital role these facilities play, their closure would be both unreasonable and impractical.

Firstly, our village is home to St James', a historic church, which is widely promoted by Medway Council as a significant Charles Dickens tourist attraction; the churchyard being his inspiration in the opening chapter of *Great Expectations*, where the hero Pip meets Magwitch the convict. Also located here are what have become known as 'Pip's Graves' – the forlorn gravestones of thirteen babies that Dickens describes as *"little stone lozenges each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat row beside their [parents'] graves"*. Thousands of visitors come all year round to explore this landmark, yet it lacks its own toilet facilities. It is entirely unrealistic to expect members of the public, including elderly visitors, families, and those with mobility or health difficulties, to navigate this destination without access to public toilets. It is also extremely sexist and smacks of inequality as without alternative provisions, visitors would be left with no choice but to either leave prematurely or resort to unsuitable options, which could negatively affect both the church and the surrounding area.

One area that needs serious consideration is the potential risk to children should male visitors be forced to relieve themselves in open fields or the playpark due to the lack of toilet facilities. This poses an unnecessary and entirely avoidable safeguarding concern, as it increases the likelihood of children being exposed to inappropriate or unsanitary situations. Ensuring the public toilets remain available especially when attracting visitors to this rural location, is a matter of public health, hygiene, and community safety, particularly in the areas where families and young children frequently gather.

Medway Council should be promoting equality and ensuring that differently abled individuals and those with specific toilet needs are not discriminated against when visiting rural locations and places of historical interest such as Cooling. The absence of our village's public toilet facilities would subsequently limit their ability to explore and enjoy this significant location, creating an unnecessary barrier and reinforcing discrimination and exclusion. Medway Council must consider the impact of this decision on inclusivity and equal access for all individuals, ensuring that our rural location remains welcoming and accessible for all.

Additionally, these public toilets serve an essential function for a vast number of people beyond church visitors. The attached village hall, which is a registered charity, is hired out to people from the wider area, whilst families come to the adjacent playpark because it is safe, and the play equipment is extremely well-maintained. Cyclists, walkers, delivery drivers (male and female), and other travellers passing through our rural village rely on these toilet facilities daily. With the suggested possible closure of the public toilets in High Halstow and those in Cliffe

already closed keeping the toilets open in Cooling must be seen as even more of a priority. Unlike urban areas where alternative toilets may be readily available in cafes or shops, our village has no such options. The closure of this facility would create significant inconvenience and discourage visitors from stopping, potentially harming local businesses and tourism.

The village's annual precept is currently £4,250. Should the parish council take over the running of the public toilets, the parish precept demand to Medway Council would have to rise significantly to cover this responsibility. The public toilets are used exclusively by visitors to St James' Church, visitors to the playpark, visitors to the village hall, polling station staff, walkers, ramblers, cyclists, delivery drivers, and farm labourers walking between farms. If the precept rises, this will place an unfair financial burden on the small village's parishioners who will bear the increase in the form of a further addition to the additional parish contribution they already pay within their council tax to Medway Council, even though they do not use the facility themselves, as they have toilets in their own homes. It would be entirely unreasonable for residents to bear the cost of a service that primarily benefits tourists, visitors and the wider community.

The village hall survives on its hiring fees for children's parties and social events and contributions from the parish council precept. Medway Council also hires the village hall as a Polling Station, indicating the adjacent public toilet is not only used by recreational visitors, but voters and polling station staff whilst a democratic process is being undertaken and when the availability of a toilet is useful, if not essential.

Would Medway Council still be willing to promote a significant Charles Dickens tourist attraction to visitors knowing there is no public toilet available in such a rural area, and would it continue to advocate the popular Heron Trail on Cycle Route 179 where cyclists will have nowhere to legitimately spend a penny?

In addition, there is also a significant lack of clarity surrounding the ownership of the public toilet building itself. While the land on which the toilets stand was generously gifted to the village hall by the Muggeridge family many years ago, it was constructed by the defunct Strood Rural District Council during a Labour held majority which threw itself into building public toilets throughout Medway's rural villages, however ownership of the actual structure remains unknown. The facility is maintained by Medway Norse, and the keys are held by the Village Hall Committee. Given this uncertainty, it would be inappropriate to plan regarding closure without first resolving the matter of ownership.

Medway Council must look at the bigger picture and decide if the ramifications of this particular cost-cutting exercise will kill off many of its other provisions. The village's tourism, heritage, accessibility and democracy are all at stake, and this decision must be reconsidered in the context of the wider impact it will have on the council's strategic goals.

For all these reasons, we strongly urge Medway Council to reconsider its proposal and ensure that this vital public facility remains open. Closing these toilets would not only disadvantage residents and visitors but also contradict the council's own promotion of the village as an historic and cultural destination.

1.2 Comments from the owners of the Toilet Block, Cooling Village Hall Charity (CVHC) :

It has been brought to our attention that Medway Council (MC) is considering closing some public toilets, including those at the above premises. This has been discussed by our committee, which has the following comments:

No doubt you are aware, we are a relatively small village comprising of some 50 + houses, the Church, a Public House, Cooling Castle, and the attached Castle Barn facility. These premises contribute community charges, business rates, etc, to MC which in relative terms are fairly substantial, especially when you consider we only have the village hall/play park, plus two street lights, then respective costs are relatively low. Therefore, maintaining the public toilets, I think you would agree, would be the least (MC) could provide.

We would also like to point out that the park which adjoins the Village Hall is supported by many parents with small children from all over Medway, as it is a safe environment for younger children and toddlers (who often need toilet facilities more than most).

We also hire the Hall out for parties/functions where food & drink are provided as well as holding several village events there, and the Hall is utilised for many other purposes, i.e. local polling station, so toilet facilities are an absolute essential facility that we cannot do without.

In addition, I believe (MC) promotes the Dickens's link in its Tourist literature, we get thousands of visitors annually from all over the UK, & from abroad, who want to see the Castle the Church and the child graves in the Churchyard. We are also on the Saxon Shore way and hundreds of walkers come through the village, on a monthly basis. Also, the route is used by many cycling clubs/associations in the area again involving hundreds, probably thousands of cyclists. Also, with the increase of internet shopping , we now get approximately 50 delivery drivers per day entering the village to deliver goods, and I am sure there are many other users that I have not mentioned, all of whom use the Public Toilets.

Finally, I would like to point out that if people have no toilet facilities, they resort to desperate measures in desperate times, when needing the loo, and will use the closest, quietest, unseen spot to the original facility, and hence the Village Park or Churchyard will become the new Village Toilets. This in turn will result in potentially much higher costs to (MC) through environmental health issues , clear up costs , social unrest, Police time, etc, etc, as local residents will be reporting such acts, and many other problems will ensue. Surely, I do not have to go any further, and you can appreciate the need to maintain our Village Public Toilets for the benefit of all concerned.

In addition to the above things that have changed post covid, these changes have had a profound effect on people's needs for public places in general, including:

- Social distancing during covid restrictions meant that many more people joined walking and cycling groups to get out of suburban areas and into the country, so the toilet use has gone up considerably.
- The onset of online shopping has seen a vast increase in the number of delivery drivers, not only from the private sector, but also individual people who are self-employed using their own vehicles.

- Also, larger supermarkets have introduced self-service tills fourfold and therefore many staff have been redeployed into logistics departments, driving grocery delivery vans.
- In addition, many of our High street banks have shut and again lots of staff have found themselves working for themselves and often it involves delivering products to customers doors direct.
- The play park and the Village Hall with the toilets are the only public space we have in Cooling, and the toilets are well used by a large percentage of Medway residents from the surrounding areas, and this facility would be sorely missed if any parts were shut.

1.3 Comments from High Halstow Parish Council (HHPC) which also owns the freehold of the land which the toilet block is built on and leases this to Medway Council:

HHPC, would like the toilets to remain open and is prepared to consider running the toilets itself.