

Report on the locking of Blenheim Gardens from April 1st 2024

Background

Somerset Council is facing financial constraints and has decided to stop providing overnight locking services for parks and gardens from April 1st 2024. This will have an effect on Wellington Park in Wellington, Vivary Park in Taunton and Blenheim Gardens in Minehead. Both Wellington Town Council and Taunton Town Council have agreed to finance the closing of their respective Parks.

Needs

Somerset Council currently provide the locking of Blenheim Gardens at night. The estimated cost of this is c. £12,000 per Annum. Town Council currently open and close the towns public conveniences via our in house amenities team. The Clerk has spoken with members of the MTC Amenities Team and they are prepared to undertake the locking of Blenheim Gardens as part of their toilet locking rota. Currently, the toilets in Town follow the current opening/closing timetables:

- April – September: 09:00 – 19:00
- October – March: 09:00 – 16:00

In order for the cost of locking the Gardens to remain as low as possible, It would be necessary for the Gardens to be added to this existing opening and closing timetable. Although realistically, the Gardens wouldn't be locked exactly on these times as by the time the other toilets are closed, the Gardens could be getting closed up to an hour later. This does however, need to be a consideration for Councillors as the locking of the Gardens historically has been 'an hour after dawn and an hour before dusk' In recent years, the locking of the Gardens has been more 'ad hoc' and it has not been unusual for the Gardens to still be open at 21:00 in the winter months. Because of this, if MTC do decide to take on the locking of the Gardens, users of the Gardens may need to adjust to the change in closing times. It would be a sensible approach for MTC to finance the supply of new and clear signage stating the opening and closing times at the entrances to the Gardens and make use of Social media, local press etc. to notify users of the change. The Gardens can open at 8:00 AM daily, handled by Somerset staff on weekdays with a negligible increase in MTC workload on weekends when opening toilets. The proposals have been discussed with officers at Somerset Council and they have confirmed them to be acceptable.

Finance

The additional staffing cost for MTC to lock the gardens is estimated at £4,000. Funding for new signage would also be required. However, the 2024/25 budget has a devolution budget that can cover these additional costs.

Recommendation

To Approve the recommendations of the Finance and General Purposes Committee for MTC to undertake the locking and unlocking of Blenheim Gardens from 1st April 2024 for an initial 1 year trial.

Ben Parker, Town Clerk, March 2024