

Committee: Planning and Transportation	Date: 5 July 2016
Subject: Suicide prevention: Bridge signs	Public
Report of: Director of Community and Children's Services	For Decision

Summary

This report discusses the need for Samaritan and Royal National Lifeboat Institution signage to be placed on City of London bridges in order to reduce suicide attempts from the bridges.

There is a need for both sets of signs on the bridges. The Samaritans' signs are aimed at offering a person who might be looking to commit suicide from a bridge within the City of London someone to speak to. In contrast the RNLI signs give witnesses instructions of what to do should they see a person jump into the River Thames so that the Coastguard is able to rescue them as quickly as possible.

Recommendations

Subject to Planning and Transportation Committee Members being satisfied it is in the best interests of the Trust, they are asked to:

- Agree the principle of the proposal and the making of applications for planning permission, advertisement consent and listed building consent as necessary.
- Subject to any necessary consents being obtained, authorise the Comptroller and City Solicitor to prepare and complete any necessary licences permitting the placing of the signs on the Bridges.

Background

1. There are 20-25 suicides per year found in the Thames, yet there have been no previous attempts in this time to prevent or intervene on the bridges. Drowning in the Thames is the most common method of suicide in the City of London and this proportion is increasing (57% in 2014). From London Bridge alone in 2014 there were 52 calls for help and eight who jumped. In 2015 12 people jumped from London Bridge.
2. City of London Police cover five bridges on the Thames: Blackfriars, Tower, London, Southwark and the Millennium Bridge. Of 214 calls to the police regarding threats of suicide in 2014, 105 of these occurred from these bridges and 21 of 43 suicide attempts occurred from these bridge.
3. The first responders to any person in danger of entering the water attempt on the Thames are the Royal National Lifeboat Institute (RNLI) who are supported by the Marine Policing Unit (MPS). Once a person has jumped from a bridge and embankment it is essential to get them out of the water as quickly as possible.

What has already been done?

4. The City of London Corporation has recently developed a Suicide Prevention Action Plan which has highlighted a need to do more to reduce suicides from bridges in the City of London. Following the transfer of public health functions from the NHS to local government in April 2013, suicide prevention became a local authority led initiative involving close collaboration with the police, clinical commissioning groups (CCGs), NHS England, coroners and the voluntary sectors.
5. Due to the increase in suicides in the Thames 'The Bridge Pilot' has been developed as a joint initiative between the City of London Corporation, City of London Police, the Metropolitan Police, the Samaritans and the RNLI. One of the recognised approaches to reducing suicide at iconic sites is to encourage help seeking behaviour by signposting to support. There are several examples in the UK of how this has been effective. Signs with the Samaritans' phone number for example have been placed at a suicide hot spot car park in the New Forest in England resulting in a significant reduction in the number of suicides. The City of London intends to add to this evidence bank through The Bridge Pilot.
6. Six signs have been put on London Bridge with the Samaritans' free phone number (appendix 1) to encourage help seeking behaviour of those who might be in distress. Additionally the Metropolitan Police and the Samaritans have developed training packages which are being delivered to frontline staff and business employees in the area of London bridge focusing on how to recognise a person who may be about to commit suicide and how to approach them.
7. The Bridge pilot began in April 2016 and will last 12 months to see if it has an impact on levels of suicide attempts from London Bridge. The rate of suicide calls and incidents will be monitored and compared to baseline figures from 2014 and 2015.

What we want to do next

8. Given that suicide attempts are in no way exclusive to London Bridge in the City of London it is proposed that signs with the Samaritans' free phone number be placed on each City of London Bridge. The additional bridges would be Blackfriars, Tower, Southwark and the Millennium Bridge. This is a low cost intervention with each sign costing just £30 from the Public Health budget. The signs will be erected by an independent contractor at a cost of approximately £100 per bridge.
9. In addition to this the RNLI propose signs with emergency information be placed on the bridges to trigger the correct action should a witness see a person jump/fall from a bridge. These signs will tell the public to ring 999 and ask for the Coastguard (not the Police), which will send the request straight to the lifeboat station via the Coastguard saving time for the RNLI to get to the person. Requesting the Fire Brigade or Police can have a significant impact on response times and thus on the opportunity to save a person' life. The RNLI signs will be paid for and erected by the RNLI and all applications regarding the signs will be made by the RNLI.

10. The City Corporation reviewed lifebuoy provision prior to the 2012 Olympics, and so coverage is very good with few gaps. Currently lifebuoy boxes have signs warning of fines for misuse. These signs could be replaced with the Dial 999 and ask for Coastguard message. The lifebuoy boxes and signs are owned and maintained by the City of London Corporation.
11. Although the bridge pilot is not yet complete and results are not yet collated it is proposed to start the process of obtaining permissions for signs to be placed on other City of London bridges because of the complicated and time consuming nature of getting planning and listed permission for the bridges. Not all of the bridges owned and maintained by the City Corporation are within the City of London boundary. Determination periods for planning and listed building consent from other Local Authorities could also cause delays.
12. It should also be noted that a further project being developed by the RNLI is to establish bridge watch on Waterloo Bridge at peak times so vulnerable people can be approached. The impact of this project will be assessed with a view to rolling this out on other Bridges on the River Thames.

Financial Implications

13. Officer time to drive this project forward will be substantial. Colleagues from Public Health and Planning will need to determine sign locations and apply for the necessary permissions.
14. The costs of the signs are £30 each. The number of signs on each bridge would be (approximately) six each so the cost for all four bridges would be £720. The signs would be fixed to the bridge by a contractor at a cost of approximately £100 each. This makes the total cost for signs and fixing approximately £1,120 which will come out of DCCS public health grant.
15. The bridges, while generally owned and maintained by the City Corporation, are not all within the City of London boundary. The southern half of Southwark Bridge and Millennium Bridge are within the London Borough of Southwark and they would determine whether consents are required in respect of those parts of the bridge. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets would decide whether consents are required for signs on Tower Bridge. This means there will be some costs incurred in obtaining planning and advertising permissions from these other Local Authorities.
16. Signs will be sponsored by the City Corporation, with the crest included, so would not require advertisement consent on bridges (or those parts of the bridges) within the City of London boundary.
17. Listed building consent would be required for signs on the northern half of Southwark Bridge and the whole of Blackfriars Bridge but applications would not be determined by your Committee given your responsibility for managing the bridges. The City Corporation does not charge a fee for Listed Building Consent.
18. Once the signs are on the bridges, on-going costs and officer time required will be low.

Legal Implications

19. As trustee of the Bridge House Estate the City Corporation has a number of responsibilities which include a duty to act in the best interests of the trust and to ensure the Trust is carrying out its purposes for the public benefit.

Conclusion

20. The City of London has seen an increase in suicide calls and attempt from its bridges. This report outlines the need for Samaritan and Royal National Lifeboat Institution signage to be placed on City of London bridges in order to reduce suicides from the bridges.

Appendix 1:
Sign on London Bridge:



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