

Provision of Free Public Drinking Water in UK Cities



Joseph Thomas

Abstract

Bristol Water and the International Water Security Network have identified public drinking water offerings as a potential solution to various environmental and social problems. This project explores the benefits from and obstacles to providing publicly available water, which may exist as drinking water fountains or alternatives such as the Refill scheme, where “drinkers” can obtain free water from participating business. A desk study investigating public water offerings in multiple locations in the UK, in Europe and Worldwide was completed to obtain a greater understanding of the current state of drinking water fountains. Key areas of interest included design types, maintenance, funding, partnerships, locations and risks and vulnerabilities.



History

Populations of major cities in the UK exploded during the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century, consequently increasing the demand for public water supply. In response, the Metropolitan Free Drinking Fountain Association, a philanthropic society that built free public drinking fountains around London for the poor and to dissuade people from drinking alcohol in pubs, was established in 1859. This gained support from respected figures such as Prince Albert and the Archbishop of Canterbury. As a result, in 1872, London had 300 drinking fountains, and this increased to approximately 800 in 1879 (Phurisamban and Gleick, 2017).

Current State of Provision in the UK

On the whole, the availability of public drinking water fountains in the UK is poor, with areas such as Greater Manchester, Merseyside and South Yorkshire, homes to millions of people, having no public drinking fountains whatsoever. Despite predominately featuring in cities and towns throughout the UK since the industrial revolution, councils in these areas have removed drinking fountains “a few years ago due to health risks and damage” (Davis, 2017). However, with the impacts of plastic waste now widely publicised, there is now a case for the return of drinking water fountains on a nationwide scale.

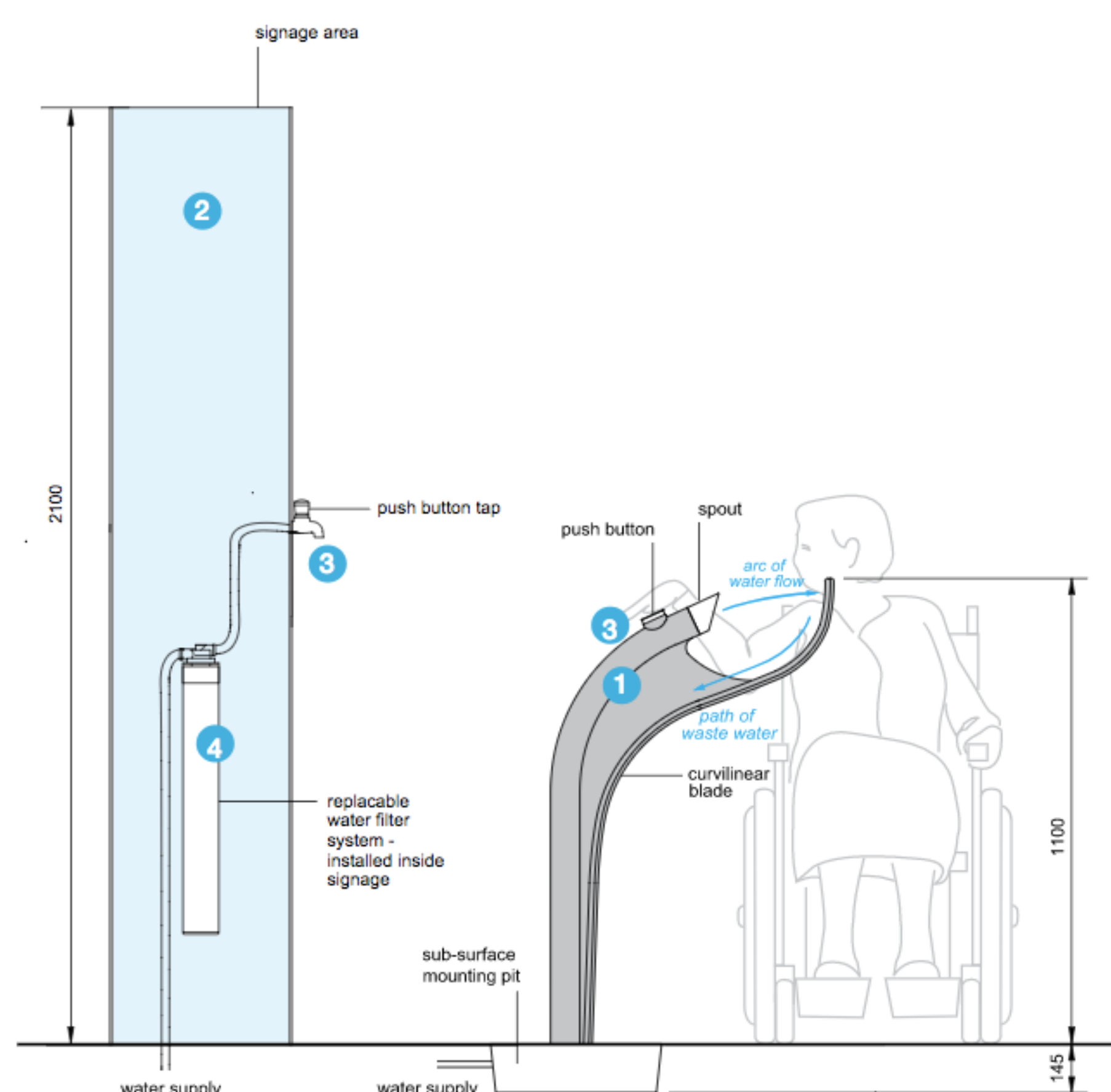
Bristol

In Bristol there are 24 traditional drinking water fountains, some of which have existed since the mid-nineteenth century. Only one of these is still operational. Bristol has two other public drinking water fountains, one in the Millennium Square, constructed in 2015, and another in Queens Square, introduced in 2016. The fountains are popular, within four months of installation 12,736 litres of water were withdrawn, equating to 60,000 drinks (Bristol Water, 2018).

In addition to these fountains, over 200 businesses in Bristol offer free tap water offerings to the public. These initiatives are part of Bristol Refill schemes in an attempt to reduce plastic waste and the consumption of sugary drinks. Refill Bristol’s success has encouraged 18 other cities and areas in the UK to get involved and install Refill stations within businesses.



Design types



Hull

In the northeastern city of Hull, Yorkshire Water partnered up with several organisations to install three drinking water fountains in Hull’s new city centre. Yorkshire Water claim that the equivalent to 29,000 bottles of water was consumed from these fountains in their first four months of operation (Yorkshire Water, 2018).

London

At this moment in time, there are 111 available drinking fountains across London’s councils which are free to use. These are predominantly in parks and open spaces and have existed for some time. More recently, 700 Refill stations have been established in London in collaboration with cafes, restaurants and other businesses.

London Mayor Sadiq Khan has publicly backed this scheme and has pledged £750,000 over three years with the hope of reducing plastic waste from single-use plastic water bottles (Davis, 2018). Khan has pledged a further £6 million to environmental enhancements around London and this will include more drinking fountains, but only if the pilots are successful.



Further Research

Follow on research will be conducted via two questionnaires, the first of these for drinking water providers in a range of cities and areas who successfully provide public drinking offerings. This survey will reveal the successes and barriers encountered whilst implementing a network of drinking water fountains so that Bristol can learn from these experiences and emulate their accomplishments. The second questionnaire will explore the water drinking culture amongst the people of Bristol by investigating their perceptions which drive different drinking water behaviours. Whether through a new generation of public water fountains or through innovations like “Refill Bristol”, provision of free public drinking water is an important challenge for cities around the world.

The International Water Security Network is funded by Lloyd’s Register Foundation, a charitable foundation helping to protect life and property by supporting engineering-related education, public engagement and the application of research. For more information, see: www.lrfoundation.org.uk

Funded by



Led by



In partnership with



References

Bristol Water (2018) *Water Fountains*. Available from: <https://www.bristolwater.co.uk/about-us/our-campaigns/tap-into-bristol/> [Accessed 20 April 2018].

Davis, N. (2017) 'They're just not very British': will cities finally splash out on water fountains? *The Guardian* [online]. 05 December. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/dec/05/british-cities-water-fountains-investigation> [Accessed 20 April 2018].

Davis, N. (2018) First of London's new drinking fountain locations revealed. *The Guardian* [online]. 25 March. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/25/london-water-drinking-fountain-locations-revealed> [Accessed 21 April 2018].

Phurisamban, R. and Gleick, P. (2017) *Drinking Fountains and Public Health Improving National Water Infrastructure to Rebuild Trust and Ensure Access*. California: Pacific Institute.

Yorkshire Water (2018) *Hull drinking fountains helping to reduce single-use plastic*. Available from: <https://www.yorkshirewater.com/about-us/newsroom-media/hull-drinking-fountains-reducing-plastic-bottle-use> [Accessed 20 April 2018].