

Copy for **Working with Older People** (May 2008)

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The availability of public toilets may not be the obvious attraction to recommend a local area. But if you need to get to the loo urgently and there isn't an option available, it can make all the difference.

For many people including a significant number of older people, public toilets are a ticket to an active life. Is this an exaggeration? As we get older we often need to use the toilet more often and with greater urgency. This means that when we leave home, we depend on the availability and accessibility of public toilets whether provided by local authorities, business or shops. If they aren't any available or open, we stay at home – on a bladder lease. Just how long can you last?

How fundamentally this affects the lives of older people was brought home in a number of recent studies undertaken by Help the Aged. In one study, ¹ 77 per cent of older people agreed that there are not enough public toilets to help older people to get out and about. In another ² piece of research, of the people who said they did not lead as full and active a life as they would like, 11 per cent (over one million) said that they would be more active if there were more public toilets. And in a survey of almost 1,000 older people³, many people say they are restricted in how often and for how long they are able to leave their homes because of a lack of public toilets.

Policy makers and stakeholder groups agree that we are witnessing a steep decline in the number of public toilets that are provided. Until 2001, the Audit Commission carried out surveys of Britain's public toilet provision which showed that it was declining rapidly. In recent cash-strapped times, in many areas the situation remains critical.

The lack of public toilets is an issue for all older people as has been highlighted by a strategic guide soon to be published by the Department of Communities and Local Government⁴. This document will encourage partnerships between local authorities, the private sector and business to devise new solutions to provision. More broadly, it will try to stimulate discussion about an area which is often taboo and 'make the case' for public toilets to promote business, community engagement and tourism. It will point to some examples of good practice, where local authorities has been able to develop new approaches and ways to provide local amenities.

¹ *Too old; older people's accounts of discrimination, exclusion and rejection* can be ordered from Help the Aged Publishing for £15 (plus £1.75 p&p) on 020 7239 1946.

² Spotlight Survey 2007 was conducted by GfK/NOP in January 2007 for Help the Aged. The full report can be ordered from Publishing for 36 (plus £1.75 p&p) on 020 7239 1946

³ Nowhere to go: public toilet provision in the UK is available to download at <http://policy.helptheaged.org.uk/healthyageing>

⁴ Unpublished but will be available from www.comunitis.gov.uk

For those who are incontinent, a lack of public toilets can make a major difference to how they cope with life. Help the Aged commissioned research⁵ which involved interviews with 20 people about the impact of incontinence on the quality of their life. What is revealed is that while some people have an optimistic and courageous way of dealing with this difficult problem, others manage with the support of family and friends and through their participation in outside interests. But for others, they regard shrinking social involvement as permanent.

Incontinence is an issue frequently brought to the attention of Help the Aged via helpline calls and letters from the public and at meetings with health professionals and older people. Whether older people are facing difficulties in accessing their local continence service or restrictions on the number of incontinence pads given out by local healthcare providers, they report situations where their dignity is compromised and their quality of life diminished.

But it is not only a lack of public toilets that is an issue but also the quality of what is on offer, according to research⁶. Eighty per cent of respondents did not find it easy to find a public toilet and 78 per cent found that their local toilet was not open when needed. Toilets may not be located in places where older people need them, such as on trains, buses and in transport terminals. Or the locks on doors, where they exist, can be difficult for those people who suffer from arthritis. Opening times were another issue; if shut, a public toilet is no good to anyone. Any many people report that public toilets are not kept clean and free from crime.

Committed to promoting the value of public toilets, Help the Aged supported the British Toilet Association's Loo of the Year award last year. This year, the Charity hopes to promote the value of age-friendly facilities and for the criteria used to 'judge' toilets to include ease of use by older people. We are hoping that older people themselves will get involved in voting for good local provision.

Further information

Research into Ageing is a biomedical research programme funded by Help the Aged. Founded in 1976, RIA funds bio-medical research into the most common illnesses affecting older people, such as incontinence. Current research projects include tackling infections caused by catheters, examining changes to cells in the bladder that trigger contractions and bladder-voiding, and the role of exercise in improving incontinence.

⁵ *Incontinence and Older People: is there a link to social isolation?* is available to download at <http://policy.helptheaged.org.uk/healthyageing>

⁶ See 3.

Help the Aged Reports:

Bladder and Bowel Weakness: managing incontinence is a free Help the Aged advice leaflet available from 020 7278 1114 or www.helptheaged.org.uk

A useful fact sheet, *Talking Incontinence: understanding urinary incontinence*, is available free of charge from www.ageing.org

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