

Copy for 'Charter Continence Care' (August 2008)

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## Why Continence Counts

Help the Aged head of active ageing Pamela Holmes considers how continence issues play a large part in securing dignity – or otherwise – for many older people and argues that changes in approach can make a real difference to the quality of life for many older people.

For far too many people, the subject of continence is either taboo or an issue of comedy. Similarly, most people do not judge a local area on the basis of its accessibility for public toilets. But if you need to get to the toilet urgently and there isn't a publicly accessible option available, it genuinely can make all the difference.

For many people - including a very large number of older people - public toilets are literally a guarantor to an active life. Many people find that as they age, the need to use the toilet comes more often and with greater urgency. This means that when many of us leave home, a dependency on the availability and accessibility of public toilets whether provided by local authorities, businesses or even local shops, becomes a really important factor in deciding whether or not to go out and about. This fact of life can be characterised as living on a 'bladder leash'.

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<sup>1</sup>, 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<sup>2</sup> 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 (equating to over one million people) said that they would be more active if there were more public toilets available. And in a survey of almost 1,000 older people<sup>3</sup>, 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. This matters – if you are an older person who is worried or anxious about the paucity of public toilets in your local area, the chances are that you may well decide not to take the risk and thereby isolate yourself in your own home. Fear of being caught short – and all the emotions that are associated with this – is a very powerful motivator.

Help the Aged and other stakeholder groups agree that there is a steady and steep decline in the number of public toilets which are provided by various outlets. Until 2001, the Audit Commission carried out surveys of Britain's

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<sup>1</sup> *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.

<sup>2</sup> 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

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

public toilet provision which showed that the numbers of available public loos were plummeting rapidly. At a time when many local authority budgets are under real and significant pressure, in many areas the situation remains critical. Far many local authorities are taking the seemingly easy decision to close essential public toilets. As budgets feel the pinch, it seems that many councillors and council officers will often deliver the axe to local toilet facilities, considering them almost to be a luxury. This is a deeply misguided decision which only serves to increase costs down the line, as older people can often retreat into isolation as a result. The knock-on effects to public health and well-being are enormous.

The lack of public toilets is an issue for all older people as has been highlighted by a strategic guide recently published by the Department of Communities and Local Government<sup>4</sup>. This Government document encourages partnerships between local authorities, the private sector and business to devise new solutions to provision. More broadly, it tries to generate discussion about a policy area which is often considered taboo. Encouragingly, it seeks to 'make the case' for public toilets as a means to drive traffic towards business, community engagement and tourism. Good practice, where local authorities have been able to develop new approaches and ways to provide decent local amenities, is rightly celebrated.

Making the business case is one which is all-too-readily forgotten by commercial outlets. Those shops and businesses that can boast good, clean, safe and accessible toilet provision will often be recognised by older customers – simply providing toilet facilities can engender loyalty among a customer base which can lead to profits and success.

### **Coping with life**

For those older people who do have issues with continence, a lack of public toilets can make a major difference to how they cope with life. Help the Aged commissioned research<sup>5</sup> which involved qualitative interviews with 20 people about the impact of incontinence on the quality of their lives. What is revealed is that while some people have an optimistic and often innovative means of handling this difficult issue, 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 a permanent, but regrettable response – with all the commensurate negative effects around stigma, isolation and neglect.

The genuine negative effects associated with continence cannot be underestimated. If you are an older person who worries about leaving the house for fear of 'getting caught short', life at home can literally resemble a prison. The taboo around the subject means that many older people feel shame and embarrassment about raising the issue of continence with healthcare professionals and carers – this is something that has to be tackled if the dignity of older patients and cared-for people is to be preserved.

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<sup>4</sup> Available from [www.communities.gov.uk](http://www.communities.gov.uk)

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

As a result of these many factors, incontinence is an issue frequently brought to the attention of Help the Aged via many helpline calls and letters from the public. It is often raised at meetings and forums with health professionals and older people. Whether older people are facing difficulties in accessing their local continence advice 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. This must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

### **Quality Counts**

Research also shows that it is not only a lack of public toilets that is an issue but also the physical quality of what is on offer<sup>6</sup>. When asked, 80 per cent of respondents to a recent survey carried out by Help the Aged did not find it easy to find a public toilet and a staggering 78 per cent found that their local toilet was not actually open when they needed to use it.

Additionally, many toilets are often not actually located in places and locations where older people tend to need them - such as on trains, buses and in transport terminals. Where facilities do exist, Help the Aged has anecdotal evidence of locks on doors being difficult to use for those people who suffer from arthritis. Opening times were another issue; if it is shut, a public toilet is no good to anyone. And many people report that public toilets are not kept clean. In all too many cases, public toilets are grotty, smelly, unappealing places which together act as strong disincentives to use. Too often, low-level crime, vandalism and anti-social behaviour is left to proliferate. A dirty toilet is not one that many people would relish having to use.

### **Celebrating Success**

As a result of our commitment to promoting the social value of public toilets, Help the Aged supported the British Toilet Association's 'Loo of the Year' award in 2007. 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 helping celebrate those champions that can demonstrate good local provision.

The Communities and Local Government Provision of Public Toilets Inquiry has taken written and oral evidence from a range of stake holders including Help the Aged. We called for more and better provision of public toilets and for a change in the legislation so there is a duty on local authorities to provide public toilets. The Committee is due to report in October.

Finally, the role of healthcare and other professionals can make a real difference to the lives of older people by simply understanding the very many issues connected with continence and provision of public toilets. The subject should never be one where sniggers and embarrassment prevails – toileting is a fact of life which all and everyone must navigate. Simple policy and

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<sup>6</sup> See 3.

behavioural changes can make a world of difference to preserving dignity for so many.

Ends

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.

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](http://www.helptheaged.org.uk)

A useful fact sheet, *Talking Incontinence: understanding urinary incontinence*, is available free of charge from [www.ageing.org](http://www.ageing.org)

Help the Aged is the charity fighting to free disadvantaged older people in the UK and overseas from poverty, isolation, neglect and ageism. It campaigns to raise public awareness of the issues affecting older people and to bring about policy change. The Charity delivers a range of services: information and advice, home support and community living, including international development work. These are supported by its paid-for services and fundraising activities - which aim to increase funding in the future to respond to the growing unmet needs of disadvantaged older people. Help the Aged also funds vital research into the health issues and experiences of older people to improve the quality of later life.

Help the Aged urgently needs donations and support to help it in the increasingly challenging fight to free disadvantaged older people from poverty, isolation and neglect. Visit [www.helptheaged.org.uk](http://www.helptheaged.org.uk) or call 0207 239 1982.