

# The Communities and Local Government Provision of Public Toilets Inquiry

## Help the Aged Memorandum April 2008

**Help the Aged** is an international charity fighting to free disadvantaged older people from poverty, isolation and neglect. Our vision is of a future where older people are free from the disadvantages of poverty, isolation and neglect, so they can live with dignity as valued, respected and involved members of society. Our mission is to secure and uphold the rights of disadvantaged older people in the UK and around the world. Working with them, we will research their needs, campaign for changes in policy, and provide services to alleviate hardship today and prevent deprivation tomorrow.

### Research and Evidence

Help the Aged (HtA) provides much of this response from two key pieces of HtA research:

- *Nowhere to go*<sup>1</sup>: an survey 1000 older people on their views on public toilet provision in their local area in August 2006
- *Incontinence and Older People: is there a link to social isolation?* Help the Aged commissioned qualitative interviews with 20 older people with incontinence<sup>2</sup>.

### Summary; why provision of public toilets is vital for older people

1. As we age, we are more likely to need to use the toilet frequently and often due to conditions such as incontinence, urgency and prostate cancer.
2. Older people say they do not find it easy to find public toilets or they are not open when they are needed.
3. The closure of public toilets can cause or exacerbate isolation and contribute to ill-health.
4. Many older people see a decline in the quality of the public toilets which do remain open. Older people want accessible, well-designed toilets with adequate number of cubicles, hand washing and disposal facilities which are well maintained.

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<sup>1</sup> *Nowhere to go :public toilet provision in the UK* from:  
<http://policy.helptheaged.org.uk/healthyageing>

<sup>2</sup> *Incontinence and Older People: is there a link to social isolation?* from:  
<http://policy.helptheaged.org.uk/healthyageing>

5. HtA is a sponsor of the Loo of the Year Awards and has influenced the inclusion of age-friendly criteria which are used in the judging of what constitutes a 'good' toilet.

### **What Help the Aged calls for**

- The creation of a national mapping of public toilet facilities to highlight where there are gaps in provision and work to improve standards
- The provision of accessible and well designed toilets with adequate number of cubicles, hand washing and disposal facilities which are cleaned regularly and are well maintained
- Hospitals trust to provide a high standard of toilets and toilet facilities on wards and to involve older people in monitoring standards

### **Response to Inquiry Questions – additional detail**

#### **1. The need for public toilets**

We are more likely to suffer from conditions such as incontinence, urgency and prostrate problems as we age. It is estimated that urinary incontinence affects around 6 million people in the UK; more than half are over 65 and the majority are women. They rely on the availability of public toilets so they can go out without fear of accidents. Many say public toilets have become more important to them as they aged and developed health problems such as prostate problems or urgency.

We are also more likely to be living with one or several disabilities as we age. There will also be those who do not consider themselves disabled but for whom even slight changes in the built environment would be of enormous benefit for example hand rails or raised toilet seats.

Many older people say that using the toilet should be a private experience and do not want to ask someone for a key or access because their need is urgent; public toilets should be provided, should be accessible and free or inexpensive to use. However, certain schemes such as that run by RADAR are perceived to have uses.

Lack of provision:

- 1.1. Increases isolation and reduces quality of life: In *Nowhere to go*, 52 per cent of respondents agreed that the lack of public toilets in their area stopped them from going out as often as they would like.
- 1.2. Causes humiliation: We have stories of older people carrying jugs or jars so that they can pass water if there is no public toilet available. Many people 'plan' trips around the availability of public toilets.
- 1.3. Increase health risks: If people feel they cannot leave their homes, they can't keep physically active. Some older people say they ration what they drink when going out so they won't need to use a public toilet; this can exacerbate health problems including urinary tract infections. Being socially isolated may lead to depression.

## **2. The image of public toilets**

- 2.1 Cleanliness: Hundreds of people informed us that public toilets can be hugely off-putting if they are dirty, smell or feel unsafe. 74 per cent said they are frequently disturbed by the lack of cleanliness of their local public toilets. Cleanliness, good lighting and security are important.
- 2.2 Promoting good toilets: HtA has successfully negotiated the inclusion of age-friendly criteria in the judging criteria for Loo of the Year Awards (LOYA) to influence best practice of public toilet provision. These criteria are based on the views and opinions collated by Help the Aged from research and small focus groups; issues such as lighting, safety and large locks. The Charity is also sponsoring a national award for the best 'age-friendly' toilet<sup>3</sup>.
- 2.3 More public toilets: Evidence from the *Spotlight Survey 2007*<sup>4</sup> found that of the people who said they did not lead as full and active a life as they would like, 11 per cent said they would be more active if there were more public toilets.

## **3. Who pays?**

A large proportion of those surveyed said they would be happy to pay a nominal amount to have public toilets staffed, clean and in a good state of repair.

## **4. Opening hours and accessibility**

- 4.1 Access: A number of people felt that using the toilet should be private and anonymous; they didn't feel comfortable with having to ask to use the facility or to go into a pub for example, to explain their need was urgent. Cards scheme such as 'Just can't wait' was useful for those who carried the card but many older people do not consider themselves incontinent so don't take part.
- 4.2 National Key Scheme (NKS): Offers independent access to disabled people to around 7,000 locked public toilets around the country.
- 4.3 Opening hours: Respondents said they did not find it easy to find a public toilet and 78 per cent said that public toilets are not open when needed.

## **5. Security and Attendants:**

Having toilets staffed by an attendant was a popular suggestion. 79 per cent said that safety concerns make public toilets unappealing to use.

## **6. Who should provide?**

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<sup>3</sup> Loo of the Year Awards. For more information, visit [www.loo.co.uk](http://www.loo.co.uk)

<sup>4</sup> *The Spotlight Survey 2007* ordered from Help the Aged publishing on 020 7239 1946

Attitudes vary to the provision of public toilets by other than local authorities. While 84 per cent of respondents felt that shops and businesses should make more effort to provide toilet facilities for the public to use, others felt this potentially compromised their anonymity, dignity and privacy. Too often new shopping developments are built without any consideration for toilet facilities. Transport systems that include toilet facilities are also needed. The scheme operated by the London Borough of Richmond was popular with some people because signs advertised the business's toilets, some toilets had disabled access and there were business staff about making it feel safe. Many people felt very strongly that there should be a duty placed on local authorities to provide adequate public toilets for the community.

### **7. Dignity and *Behind Closed Doors: using the toilet in private*<sup>5</sup> in hospitals**

The aim of this work is to raise awareness that people, whatever their age and physical ability, should be able to choose to use the toilet in private in all care settings including hospitals. There are many reported instances of poor and undignified care of older people when it comes to toilets; being given a bed pan rather than being taken to the toilet and curtains not being drawn around someone using the commode.

The campaign emphasises the importance of the environment, as well as care practices. It provides commissioners, chief executives and inspectors with a measure of good practice and clinical governance. It has produced a number of resources to support local people and practitioners to improve the quality of toilet facilities on wards.

*Ends.*

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<sup>5</sup> Behind Closed Doors is a dignity campaign led by the British Geriatric Society, Help the Aged and other organisations to improve standards of toilets on hospitals wards. [www.bgs.org.uk/campaigns/dignity.htm](http://www.bgs.org.uk/campaigns/dignity.htm)