

Finding a toilet has become quite a problem, particularly in areas of the country where cafes, pubs and restaurants have been temporarily shut down because of the pandemic. But even when you do find them, public facilities can be difficult to use for many, so how can we make them more inclusive?



Public inconveniences

For a whole range of people, from delivery drivers to people with continence issues and pregnant women, the difficulty of finding a toilet can be a real problem. Even before Covid-19, the number of public toilets had been decreasing as local authorities cut back on spending but Professor Clara Greed, emerita professor of inclusive urban planning at UWE Bristol, believes this is a false economy. The ability to spend a penny is very much linked to improving the local economy of an area and increasing its attraction as both a place to live and visit.

Self-confessed 'toilet obsessed' Professor Greed first became interested in the subject when she was researching the social aspects of planning. She asked members of the public what the main problems with cities were and what they wanted from town planners. Professor Greed explained: "Many people, especially women, said they were concerned about the lack of public toilets as it affected their chances of travelling and accessing the city 'comfortably', especially for those accompanied by small children. In fact, public toilet provision is not a statutory duty on town planning departments in the UK. As a town planner and urban designer, I've been researching and campaigning on 'women and planning' issues

for many years and toilet provision is part of that passion."

The sensationalist "mountains of rubbish and human waste" newspaper headlines, after crowds flocked to Britain's seaside resorts this summer, highlighted the issue of the lack of public conveniences. Professor Greed said: "With so many people away from work and unable to travel abroad for holidays because of Covid-19, there is an even greater need for toilets. The 17 million people who usually go abroad are holidaying in the UK but so many of the toilets that used to cater for large crowds of holidaymakers have long since closed."

Professor Greed is not convinced the closure of many of the UK's public toilets for health reasons is the right approach, as she explained: "It can be argued that Covid-19 is not transmitted more strongly in toilets, as it can be found on any surface, especially door handles and rails, in any location. The UK Government keeps on telling us to wash our hands during the Covid-19 crisis but there are very few public places where you can do that."

In addition to campaigning for more toilets, Professor Greed is concerned with the trend towards 'unisex' or gender neutral toilets as a panacea for poor public toilet provision. Local authorities, architects and developers argue that gender neutral



Studies show that gender-neutral toilets exclude people as much as include them

Professor Clara Greed, above, town planner and urban designer

both males and females to share the same toilet does not increase the number of toilets, just the number of people using that particular toilet. We need to factor in the importance of gender. In order to create 'toilet equality', it's not enough just to provide equal provision but rather to provide more facilities for women who take longer to use the toilet for a variety of biological reasons including menstruation, pregnancy, incontinence and also having to get into the cubicle and remove some of their clothing.

Professor Greed said: "Another issue with gender neutral toilets is the issue of people feeling uncomfortable mixing in this environment particularly women when they have their periods, both sexes when queueing together, and 'bladder shyness' especially for men caused by anxiety. A women's toilet is also still seen as a separate and safe space for women."

This anxiety is also exacerbated by poor design: cubicles too narrow that do not allow people to bring in pushchairs or large shopping bags; very large toilet roll dispensers that impede movement; large sanitary bins that can further reduce room; and doors that open inwards restricting space. And then there is the issue of design and placement of locks, levers, door handles and flushing devices. Professor Greed said: "The less touching of fixtures and fittings and the more automation, the better, provided the mechanisms are serviced and rapidly repaired when they malfunction."

To try to ensure some of these issues are not forgotten, she's a member of British Standards committees, notably BS6465 and BS8300, which address sanitary provision and accessibility of public buildings.

Another fellow campaigner is Jo-Anne Bichard, Director of the Public Toilets Research Unit at the Royal College of Art's Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design, and co-author of *Publicly Accessible Toilets – an Inclusive Design Guide*. She agrees with Professor Greed's concern around gender neutral toilets. She said: "It's not a question of just changing the sign on the door, they actually do require their own specific design."

Jo-Anne's research looks at the issues of an ageing society and the fact that the poor provision of public toilets creates a serious barrier to their wider participation in public life. She said: "Government health messages encourage people to go outside to be active but, in many cases, people find it difficult to go on even short journeys if they know there is no toilet available. With more toilets closed because of Covid-19, this situation has been exacerbated."

toilets make these facilities more accessible and will help reduce queues for women's toilets but Professor Greed and others say that studies show that they do as much to exclude people as include them.

She explained: "Sticking a gender neutral sign on an existing public convenience does not solve the problem.

Just because you're asking



● Poor provision of public toilets can create a serious barrier to participation in public life

The Publicly Accessible Toilets study looked at the best practice in provision of a range of public toilets including community toilet schemes organised by local authorities, automatic toilets or 'superloos', and accessible toilets. The research team also developed The Great British Public Toilet Map app which provides the locations of nearby public toilets (see www.toiletmap.org.uk).

When you ask Professor Greed what the ideal toilet should look like she puts on her planner's hat and says that it's actually way down on her list of priorities; the first issue is where toilets should be located. She explained: "At a district level, you want them where there is the most footfall, so in city centres, transport interchanges like bus and railway stations, and shopping centres. Then look at a neighbourhood level so there's at least one decent public block of toilets, particularly where there are attractions such as at a local park or beachfront.

"Then look at the location of the toilets and consider accessibility, lighting and visibility. For safety reasons, you ideally want them in the middle of a town and not hidden behind bushes or next to bins. And good signage needs to let people know the direction and walking distance to the toilet. Only then do you look at the design of the actual toilet block and ask if it's good for the user and makes the situation better. Let's start by thinking about what people actually need." ●

Further reading

Publicly Accessible Toilets – an Inclusive Design Guide
by Gail Knight and
Jo-Anne Bichard

