



Public Toilets in Wales

Introduction

A lack of access to public toilets is an issue that is frequently raised with the Commissioner by older people and impacts upon people's everyday lives in a number of ways. For example, not being confident that enough public toilets are available often inhibits older people from getting out and about and doing the things that matter, such as seeing friends and family, shopping, and other day-to-day activities, limiting independence and social interaction. Toilet provision is also a public health issue as people often put their health at risk by limiting fluid intake if they need to leave home but are unsure that toilets will be available.

While a lack of public toilets often has a particular impact on older people, especially in terms of potential health consequences, ensuring that public toilets are available in communities benefits everyone.

This briefing explores the public health impact of the decline in public toilet provision and the other barriers that can prevent older people from accessing these facilities, as well as the action needed from the Welsh Government and local authorities to improve access to public toilets.

The decline in provision of public toilets

Polling undertaken on behalf of the Commissioner earlier this year with people aged over 60 found that public toilets represented a major area of concern: 61% of respondents said it was difficult to access public toilets in their local area.¹ As we grow older, we are more likely to develop conditions that mean that we need to use toilets more frequently, making this an ever more important issue.²

Access to public toilets has been highlighted recently by the Wales Seniors Forum which relaunched the 'P is for People' campaign in Summer 2023. This included a survey about public toilets, the results of which are expected this autumn and will provide further insight to the challenges faced across Wales.

Available public toilets are in decline. Research shows that between 2010 and 2020, the UK lost more than a fifth of its public toilets.³ While up to date figures are not available, information shared by older people and stakeholders suggests that public toilets continue to close across Wales as local authorities seek to manage the cost of living crisis, while other venues that

¹ Older People's Commissioner for Wales (2023) March Polling. Available at:

² In men, for example, prostate problems, common over the age of 50, can result in needing to urinate more frequently. See: NHS (2021) Prostate problems. Available at: [Prostate problems - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk)

³ Guardian (2021) Skip to the loo? Easier said than done as Britain loses hundreds of public toilets. Available at: [Skip to the loo? Easier said than done as Britain loses hundreds of public toilets | Society | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/mar/11/skip-to-the-loo-easier-said-than-done-as-britain-loses-hundreds-of-public-toilets)

allowed public access to toilets such as leisure centres, pubs and cafes continue to close or reduce hours.

In 2019, the Royal Society for Public Health's report Taking the P*** showed that access to public toilets was inadequate across the UK. 74% of respondents from across all-age groups reported that there were not enough public toilets.⁴ This creates a 'loo leash' where people feel unable to go too far from home.⁵

Public health and other impacts

Not being sure that toilets will be available often leads people to adopt unhealthy behaviours such as restricting fluids. Over half the public admit to restricting their fluid intake in case they cannot find a toilet when they are out, which causes dehydration and can lead to a myriad of side effects. The impact of dehydration can be particularly severe for older people, leading to impaired coordination and increased likelihood of falls, as well as short term memory loss and slower reaction times.⁶

Concerns about continence and continence problems are common, but facilities are not equipped to address this. For example, one in three men over 65 in the UK are estimated to have a urinary incontinence problem, yet public toilets often do not contain facilities to manage this⁷, something recently highlighted by Prostate Cancer UK's 2023 campaign, Boys need Bins. Incontinence can be stigmatising, and male toilets often do not have any bins to dispose of incontinence pads.⁸ Men who need incontinence pads can have anxiety about going out in public because of the need to dispose of pads.⁹

Even where toilet facilities are available, people may be reluctant to use them if they are not clean, maintained, and accessible. Research shows that barriers to using public toilets include cleanliness, smell, and lack of toilet paper.¹⁰ Design is also important, and toilets need to be designed so they can be used by people with disabilities or limited mobility, something more likely to affect us as we grow older.

Knowing that toilet facilities are available encourages older people to feel more confident getting out and about. Conversely, a lack of public toilets prevents older people from spending time and money on activities that they want to be doing. Research by the International Longevity Centre-UK (ILC) shows that 72% of over 60s felt they weren't spending their time and money in the way they'd like¹¹ and identified that 28% of older people wanted to go out more for food and coffee,

⁴ Royal Society for Public Health (2019) Taking the P***: the Decline of the Great British Public Toilet. Available at: [459f4802-ae43-40b8-b5a006f6ead373e6.pdf \(rsph.org.uk\)](https://www.rsph.org.uk/documents/459f4802-ae43-40b8-b5a006f6ead373e6.pdf)

⁵ Ibid.,

⁶ NHS Wales (2023) Dehydration. Available at: <https://111.wales.nhs.uk/dehydration/>. See also [Dehydration in older people - British Nutrition Foundation](#)

⁷ [Let's talk about incontinence | Prostate Cancer UK](#)

⁸ Prostate Cancer UK (2023) Tell your MP, Boys need Bins. Available at: <https://prostatecanceruk.org/get-involved/campaigning/incontinence#:~:text=And%20it%20starts%20with%20our,easily%2C%20safely%20and%20with%20dignity>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Royal Society for Public Health (2019) Taking the P***: the Decline of the Great British Public Toilet. Available at: [459f4802-ae43-40b8-b5a006f6ead373e6.pdf \(rsph.org.uk\)](https://www.rsph.org.uk/documents/459f4802-ae43-40b8-b5a006f6ead373e6.pdf)

¹¹ International Centre for Longevity UK (2023) Money Well Spent? Available at: <https://ilcuk.org.uk/money-well-spent-overcoming-barriers-to-spending-in-later-life/>

while 27% wanted to visit their family and friends more.¹² This suggests there are also economic benefits to ensuring people can access public toilets.

Strategic approaches to local toilet provision

There is no statutory duty for local authorities to provide public toilets, but the Public Health (Wales) Act 2017¹³ requires local authorities to publish a toilet strategy. This involves assessing the needs of communities in relation to toilets and taking a strategic and transparent approach to best meet that need. The process was intended to enable a broader consideration of options available for providing toilets for use by the public, ranging from traditional stand-alone public toilets to toilets in private ownership. The Act requires toilet strategies to be regularly updated and reviewed, and while some local authorities have published up to date reviews, it is not clear whether reviews have been undertaken by every local authority and if timescales for reviewing and delivering progress are being met consistently.

Public toilets in Wales are funded by local authorities using the Revenue Support Grant, and some local authorities, such as Gwynedd¹⁴, have developed ways of increasing access to toilets by providing grants for privately owned premises to open their facilities through community toilet schemes. However, local authority budgets face significant pressures due to inflation and the cost-of-living crisis, which could further restrict people's access to public toilets despite their vital importance in enabling older people and other citizens to get out and about, undertake everyday activities and play a full role in community life.

Finding available facilities

To be able to use existing public toilets, people need information about where they are located, and the Welsh Government has developed a National Toilet Map that shows all available public toilets across Wales.¹⁵ However, the map is currently only available online, meaning that a significant number of older people will find it difficult or impossible to access – around a third of people aged 60+ do not have access to a smartphone¹⁶, while a third of people aged 75 do not have access to the internet at all. Online-only provision also means that people can only access the map when out and about in places where there is reliable mobile phone coverage, which is not universal across Wales.

Information on where to find toilets available for use needs to be provided via non-digital means. This action could form part of local authorities' toilet strategies (see above) as these are reviewed and updated, with communities coming together to agree what is most needed and practical to produce.

The Welsh Government has also developed a 'national toilet logo' for local authorities to adopt and publicise, which is designed to let people know that a building's toilet facilities are open to

¹² Ibid.,

¹³ Legislation UK (2017) Public Health (Wales) Act 2017. Available at: [Public Health \(Wales\) Act 2017 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://legislation.gov.uk)

¹⁴ Gwynedd Council (Undated) Community toilet grant scheme. Available at: <https://www.gwynedd.llyw.cymru/en/Businesses/Finance,-funding-and-grants/Grants-and-financial-assistance/Community-toilet-grant-scheme.aspx#:~:text=The%20current%20Gwynedd%20Council%20budget,public%20to%20use%20their%20toilet.&text=Please%20return%20the%20completed%20form,ToiledauCyhoeddus%40gwynedd.llyw.cymru>

¹⁵ Welsh Government (2022) National Toilet Map. Available at: [National Toilet Map | DataMapWales \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales)

¹⁶ Older People's Commissioner for Wales (2023) March Polling.

the public.¹⁷ Usage of the sign/logo is voluntary, but further and wider promotion could help to raise awareness in communities about the location of publicly available toilets.

Conclusion

Access to good quality public toilets is an issue for everyone but becomes even more important as we grow older. Lack of provision has a negative impact on public health, deters older people from taking part in a range of social and other activities, and can lead to feelings of exclusion and isolation.

There is a clear need to act on this issue, and improving access to public toilets need not be costly. In many cases, improvements could be delivered through key stakeholders coming together to determine how to make best use of the existing toilet provision available in communities and improving communication with the public about where public toilets are located.

Recommendations

The Commissioner wants to see the following action from the Welsh Government:

- Monitor the effectiveness and implementation of local authority toilet strategies, ensuring these are reviewed and updated on time, and communicated to local citizens.
- Work with local authorities to agree how best to share the national toilet map in formats other than digital.
- Establish how widely used the national logo indicating that toilets are available to the public is in practice and consider how it could be better promoted.
- Install bins in for the disposal of incontinence pads and stoma bags in all toilets across Welsh Government run buildings and encourage other sectors to do likewise.

The Commissioner wants to see the following action from local authorities:

- Re-examine all options for expanding the provision of toilets available now and in the future, including working with local businesses and organisations to make toilet facilities available to the public.
- Make information about toilet provision available in appropriate formats, including hard copy.
- Ensure reviews of public toilet strategies are conducted, published and communicated to local communities.
- Install bins for the disposal of incontinence pads and stoma bags in all toilets, including public toilets, across local authority run buildings.

¹⁷ Welsh Government (2018) The Provision of Toilets in Wales: Local Toilet Strategies. Available at: [32533 The Provision of Toilets in Wales: Local Toilets Strategies, English Version \(gov.wales\)](#)

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales is an independent voice and champion for older people throughout Wales.

The Commissioner is taking action to protect older people's rights, end ageism and age discrimination, stop the abuse of older people and enable everyone to age well.

The Commissioner is working for a Wales where older people are valued, rights are upheld and no-one is left behind.

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