

BRISTOL'S BUDGET CONSULTATION 2014-2017

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Bristol Health Partners is a collaboration between six NHS organisations, the city's two universities and its local authority, and has established a number of health integration teams (HITs) to address major public health imperatives and disease areas in the city. The Supporting Healthy Inclusive Neighbourhood Environments (SHINE) HIT aims to integrate health, well-being and social inclusion with urban development and planning agendas to reduce health risks and promote healthier lifestyles.

PROBLEMS RESULTING FROM THE CLOSURE OF PUBLIC TOILETS

While closing public toilets may be seen as a solution to reducing costs, it must be considered in the wider context including public health, quality of life, inclusion, and economic wellbeing.

Visitors and tourism

Good quality public toilet facilities contribute to a range of amenities that help to attract visitors, encouraging them to stay longer, and to visit again. The UK visitor economy is worth billions of pounds and a significant proportion of tourists, particularly from other countries, enjoy 'city breaks'. Being able to access a toilet is a fundamental need for any visitor.

Sustainable Transport

People are more likely to use public transport, or to walk or cycle, if they are confident that they will be able to use accessible and clean toilets throughout their journey.

Elderly people

'Nowhere to Go' published in 2007 by Help the Aged (Age UK) states that 3-3.5 million people suffer from urinary incontinence in the UK and more than half are over 65 with the majority being women, and the number is increasing. For many older people, the lack of toilet facilities stops them going out which has the potential to increase physical and mental health problems. The cost of health and social care falls on local authorities as well as the national health services. Physical activity, especially in later life, reduces the demands on local health services and helps older people maintain their independence. So important is the issue of toilet provision for health and wellbeing of the global ageing population that the World Health Organisation has cited it as a major factor in their Age Friendly Cities Guide.

Health

Many activities that support health and wellbeing take place outside of the home. Public toilets in places like parks and promenades help to encourage people who may need regular toilet access to take exercise and stay physically active. Whilst urinary function reduces with age, it can also be diminished by medication taken for the management of chronic health conditions such as heart failure, some forms of cancer, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease. The Bladder & Bowel Foundation reports that 4.8 million people in the UK under the age of 24 years are estimated to have already experienced some kind of problem with their bladder control and a similar number with bowel control [June 2008].

Women

A report by the Bladder & Bowel Foundation in June 2008 found that 32% women of a sample of 1040 adults have bladder control problems compared to 13% of men. Women who are pregnant or at the menopause need to use the toilet more often, as do those with other conditions such as diabetes [Clara

Greed, Inclusive Urban Design: Public Toilets, Architectural Press, 2003]. At any one time, about a quarter of all women of childbearing age will be menstruating and require access to clean toilets. Women often take on the role of carer, whether of older people or children. In these situations they need toilets in accessible locations with facilities to accommodate the needs of those for whom they are caring as well as their own. In many areas, urinals are provided at night with no provision for women.

Children

The closure of a public toilet means that those with babies to change have to find alternative, less sanitary means e.g. on a bench in a park. The choice for many in this situation is to leave the soiled nappy behind incurring additional cleaning costs for the local authority. Small children have less control over their bladders and outings can be abruptly curtailed if a child needs to use a toilet. If there is no public toilet available, the choice for the carer is either to go home or find a less hygienic place. Young people suffer from embarrassment and anxiety about toilet related issues and their need for publicly available toilets should also be recognised. For example, girls may have just started learning to cope with menstruation.

Disability and chronic illness

According to Professor Greed one in eight (12.5%) of the population is classified as disabled and has problems with mobility, fragility or lack of stamina which require consideration with regard to accessing public toilets. More people suffer from some form of bladder and bowel problems than with asthma, diabetes and epilepsy put together. [Bladder & Bowel Foundation]. Conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome, ulcerative colitis, and Crohn's disease affect both men and women and cause many people to stay at home because of the lack of public toilets.

Hygiene

A lack of available and appropriate facilities at the right time during the day and night encourages street fouling, and cleaning up the mess is a significant and costly task for local authorities. In some areas there are temporary urinals for use during the night time, especially at the weekends. This can cause some people to avoid these areas. The needs of the homeless are seldom mentioned in connection with public toilets, but their toileting requirements do need to be addressed if street fouling is to be reduced.

Mobile workers

Delivery personnel, taxi drivers, lorry drivers, police officers and other mobile workers need access to public toilets as they carry out their duties.

Summary

The closure of public toilets has the potential to: reduce independence; cause embarrassment, indignity and distress; cause particular problems for children, women, disabled people and people with chronic illnesses; contribute to mental health problems; cause problems for mobile workers; reduces opportunities for physical activity; incurs additional costs related to medical and social services; can affect the perception of visitors and tourists; encourages street fouling and unhygienic practices.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Priority should be given to the ensuring the availability of public toilets in areas where no other provision is likely to be available.

Community toilet schemes

Community toilet schemes provide a means by which local authorities, working in partnership with local businesses, can enhance public access to toilets. The schemes allow the public to use toilet facilities in private premises such as pubs, cafes, shops and offices which can be used by the public without having to make a purchase. The Local Authority pays the owner of the premises for providing the facility. The following measures can enhance such schemes:

- Signs announcing the community toilet scheme placed at 'entrance points' to an area, such as car parks, town centres and public transport hubs, so that visitors know what to look out for
- Businesses display stickers prominently in their window, to inform passers-by that their toilets are available, and of the types of toilet that they provide
- Directional signs and paper maps indicating community toilets include details of available toilet facilities, the distance, and the opening hours
- Council buildings, such as libraries and leisure centres, are included

Digital technology

Bristol City Council should consider its contribution to online The Great British Public Toilet Map.

<http://greatbritishpublictoiletmap.rca.ac.uk/>

Consideration should also be given to apps and texting facilities that supply details of the nearest toilet and opening times.

REFERENCES

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