

ONE KILBURN What does a great public toilet look like?

These notes are based on my experience, the observations of KOVE member Duncan Yearwood, discussions at the REEL KOVE film-course and online between me and Professor Jo-Anne Bichard at the Royal College of Art on 4th July 2023.

It declares itself proudly (because it is a public service not an afterthought)

The toilet is well sign-posted both on the approach and at the site with a notice describing the opening hours that says who is responsible for the facility

It will be designed to a high and imaginative standard

The structures are well-built in durable and vibrant materials

You can go in just to wash your hands, fill up a water bottle or use sanitiser

You can go in to change a baby or manage children

There is a pull-down seat in a well-lit space in case you need to wait

There is clear evidence that the toilet is well-maintained and clean

There's a notice saying how often staff visit with a tick-off check-list

There's a notice saying how to contact staff which explains they are trained

- to clean
- to identify maintenance problems and fix or report them
- to follow agreed procedures when dealing with anti-social behaviour, be it do with sex, drugs or vandalism

If the toilet is out of order there is a contact phone number, an estimate of when it will reopen and information about the nearest alternative toilet

There should be a maintained space enabling users to lock up a bicycle or scooter

It does everything it can to make sure everyone can use it promptly

The service is free and open for twenty-four hours

Could it perhaps invite donations where there is sufficient site supervision?

The facility opens into a gender-neutral space set out to minimise discomfort at sharing such a space

Consultations should emphasise exploring diversity. Potential users should meet and work together in situ. The aim is to give people who experience urgency, people who have physical access issues, people who prioritise safety, people who struggle with the legibility of shared spaces, people who identify as gender-fluid and people who identify as gender-specific to empathise, identify common concerns and compromise where possible on difference.

It offers access to standard (no special requirements), ambulant (space, hand-rails and supports) and universal (wheelchair-accessible) cubicles

A good ratio in an age-friendly facility would be one standard to four ambulant to one universal. A greater proportion of ambulant facilities allows scope for people who need more time.

Inside each cubicle is a washing and hand-drying facility with hot water

Retrofitted facilities may need to be cleared out, re-plumbed and rebuilt.

Cubicle doors should just say 'Toilet' with a symbol – no stick figures etc.

It should be clear whether the cubicle is occupied or not.

It should be clear inside and outside how to open and close the cubicle door.

There should be a good hook on which to hang a coat or a bag.

It is part of a progressive movement – toilets are a necessary place

A good public toilet should be a clearly identified strategic priority for the providing authority. That means it will have a capable manager operating to strategic commitments, properly trained and backed-up by front-line staff.

London has a water crisis that drought will only worsen. Work should start immediately to develop and install grey-water systems wherever feasible and to test and introduce compost toilet services as widely as possible.

Policy must refocus to emphasise the total number of cubicles and their geographical distribution. Their role under the public equality duty to help people get out and about must be reinforced. Community toilet schemes should be configured as an extension of public toilet services and not as a replacement.

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