

Nowhere to Go



Public toilet provision in the UK

Cover photos

Paul Talling: www.derelictlondon.com

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Introduction

This report summarises a Help the Aged survey of older people's views on public toilet provision in their local area that took place in August 2006.

Policy-makers, stakeholder groups and public toilet users all agree that we are witnessing a steep decline in the number of public toilets. Until 2001 the Audit Commission carried out surveys of Britain's public toilet provision, which showed that it was declining rapidly. Since then a campaigning organisation, the British Toilet Association, has estimated that public toilet provision has dropped a further 40 per cent to less than one public toilet for every 10,000 people in the UK, not taking visitors and tourists into account.

In an answer to a Parliamentary Question asked by John Hemming MP in 2005, the government made clear that the provision of public toilets is entirely up to the discretion of the local authority:

'The provision and maintenance of toilets in public places is at the discretion of local authorities who have, under section 87 of the Public Health Act 1936, a power to provide public conveniences, but no duty to do so.

'It is therefore for individual local authorities to decide whether or not to provide public toilets and, if so, how many. In doing this, each local authority must balance the competing priorities of a whole range of services. The vast majority of government support is paid as a block grant, so that local authorities have considerable freedom to determine their own spending priorities.'

In a response to a Parliamentary Question in December 2006, the Department for Communities and Local Government announced that it is undertaking research, in a similar vein to research undertaken by the Greater London Authority at the beginning of 2006, to build up an evidence base for the issue of toilet provision in public places. While this is a welcome step forward, it is clear that, in a climate of ever-tightening local authority budgets, public toilets as a discretionary service will continue to be reduced and marginalised. Without regular monitoring, such as that which the Audit

Commission used to undertake, public toilet provision will continue to be eroded until we are left with, literally, **nowhere to go**.

In some areas this erosion has already occurred. Solihull Council closed all its public toilets in an effort to save money. However, local businesses were unwilling to pick up the slack and, as the council recommended, allow non-customers to use their toilet facilities. This left many people, particularly those who have the greatest need for public toilets, restricted in how often and for how long they are able to leave their homes.

Older people's forums across the country are campaigning to save their local public toilets, or lamenting their loss. This is an issue that has a massive impact on people's quality of life, and the passion and tenacity with which many older people campaign on this issue in their local area are a testament to the value they place on public toilet provision.

The response to the Help the Aged survey was overwhelming, with almost 1,000 people sending us their comments and experiences.

Survey findings



Specific need for public toilets among the older population

There is no doubt that as we get older we become increasingly likely to develop continence issues, experiencing the need to use the toilet more often and with greater urgency. Many people wrote to highlight this and explain why the issue of public toilet provision has become so important to them:

'Most men my age suffer from prostate complaints of one form or another – when desperate there are no toilets. I have seen men have accidents – very embarrassing for the person.'

'Like many elderly people I need to find a toilet frequently and sometimes quickly!'

It is clear that as we age we experience an increased dependency on public toilets. Many older people suffer from incontinence or have continence issues, caused by muscle weakness. It is estimated that 3–3.5 million people suffer from urinary incontinence in the UK. More than half are over 65 and the majority are women.

As one gentleman pointed out, this raises concerns for the future:

'I have a waterworks problem and need to urinate frequently and at short notice. This problem has arisen as I have got older. As the population ages, this problem will get more widespread and yet the provision and opening times [of public toilets] are reducing.'

Access to public toilets

80 per cent of respondents do not find it easy to find a public toilet

78 per cent of respondents found that their local public toilets are not open when they need them

Many of the people who responded to our survey saw the decline in public toilet provision as a reflection on society and the decline in community spirit.

'I have been both astonished and appalled at the neglect and abandonment of public facilities which were set up in a more thoughtful and magnanimous time. A succession of governments have done increasingly less and less to make our

environment pleasant and hospitable. Lack of vision and agendas that do nothing to engender a community spirit and good manners are “doing” for the country. I feel ashamed to be British, actually.’

The difficulties and restricted mobility that are associated with ageing make getting to a toilet more difficult and, coupled with the continence factors above, can add to the stress and worry that not being able to find a toilet cause.

‘There are toilets in a local café, but it is upstairs which is no good for me as I have problems with muscles.’

One lady from Somerset explained that the position of the public toilet in her area has become a problem

‘In the town of Bridgewater we now only have one public toilet. It is [at] the top end of the town, so should you get caught short at the other end of town, you’ve had it, especially if you are elderly or suffer with incontinence.’

Another lady who finds that the lack of public toilets restricts her from going out as often as she would like told us:

‘The toilets in my library are for staff only – although as an emergency (!!) I was allowed to use them once.’

Location

A major barrier preventing people from using public toilets is that they are often not located in places where older people need them, such as on trains, bus and transport terminals and in parks.

‘Toilets on trains are frequently a problem – on a recent journey from Nottingham to Burton on Trent, one of the toilets was out of order and the other was locked!’

‘Although in the shopping centre there are good, clean toilets, there is a lack of provision in the wider area e.g. parks and also outside of shopping hours.’

Several people also mentioned the difficulties that the closure of public toilets in cemeteries has caused them.

Times of opening

In our survey, 78 per cent of respondents identified short opening hours as a factor prohibiting them from using public toilets. If a toilet is not open, it is no use to anyone. In many respondents’ areas the public toilets shut at 5.30pm, the same time as the shops, leaving the town centre with no evening provision.

‘As I am quite fit and active for my age (78) I do not have much difficulty finding and using a public toilet, except in the evenings when they are sometimes closed.’

In addition, opening hours need to be publicised, as a resident of Diss in Norfolk pointed out;

‘The toilets in Diss are newly built and are accessible and generally clean. However, they are not open at convenient times. Actually, I have no idea what their opening times are, but they are rarely open when I visit!’

For people who find walking more difficult than they used to, or those who find themselves with a greater urgency when they need the toilet, arriving at a toilet to find it shut can be a disaster. Regular opening hours and very clear signposting with opening times advertised on it are therefore essential.

Design

Locks on doors, where they exist, can be difficult to use for the great many older people who suffer from arthritis.

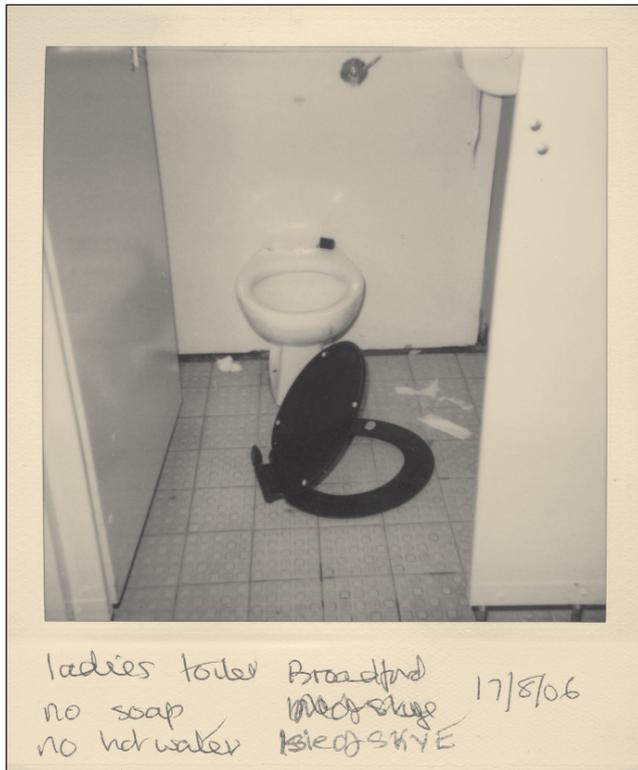
‘I have arthritis in my hands and wrists and find the fiddly little catches hard to grip. If the door is too tight-fitting as well, I’ve had it!! Big firm handles, please, and the doors checked to ensure smooth opening.’

The stress that the fear of being locked in a toilet causes will be familiar to most people, and for those with arthritis or difficulties with their hands such stress can be a frequent experience when using public toilets.

Many carers experience difficulties because of the lack of space in public toilets. A number of people find that, as a carer of the opposite sex

to the person they care for, male and female toilets can be difficult.

Older people need toilets to be clean, safe, accessible, staffed, open and located in the wide variety of places where they go.



Safety of public toilets

79 per cent of respondents find that safety concerns make public toilets unappealing

Having toilets overseen by an attendant serves to alleviate the safety concerns that 79 per cent of respondents told us they have about public toilets.

'I think all public toilets should have attendants. Most of them are rather threatening and people feel insecure.'

'My local toilets are clean, but none are manned. This can be frightening, so I would prefer to be able to use toilets in a shop.'

Some antisocial behaviour measures may not be in the best interests of older people. Blue lighting, which makes it difficult for injecting drug users to find veins and therefore deters them

from using public toilets, is unpopular with older some people:

'The supermarkets have nice toilets, but I can't see because the lights are all dark blue.'

Standards of public toilets

74 per cent of respondents are frequently disturbed by the lack of cleanliness of their local public toilets

Hundreds of people informed us that public toilets can be hugely off-putting if they are in a state of disrepair or unclean.

'Our nearest public toilets are in Pudsey, about one and a half miles away. These are disgusting, filthy and smell awful. You have to be really, really desperate to go into them.'

'The public toilets almost always make me cringe – they make me want to rush home and have a bath. On my last visit to a public toilet I had to put my coat and shopping on the floor as there was no hook or shelf, and when I pulled the flush, someone had pulled the water pipe out of the back of the toilet and all my shopping and coat were washed under the door. It was terrible.'

Respondents told us public toilets need to be clean, including the floors, the seats and the walls. There needs to be toilet paper and hot water and soap for washing hands. There should be a hook for bags on the inside of the door, and enough space to manoeuvre if you have restricted mobility or find it difficult to balance in order to squeeze into a tight space between the door and a cistern, sanitary disposal bin or shelf.

Having toilets staffed by an attendant was an overwhelmingly popular suggestion, with many people commending the cleaners and staff at their local public toilets.

What are the consequences of inadequate toilet provision?

52 per cent of respondents agree that the lack of public toilets in their area stops them from going out as often as they would like



Photographer: John Cobb

Evidence from the Help the Aged survey suggests that there are large numbers of people who are tethered by an invisible ‘bladder leash’ which restricts their movements to within easy reach of toilets. About half of the over-75 population of the UK lives alone, with studies showing that as many as 1.75 million older people report feeling lonely. Twelve per cent of older people (1.2 million) feel trapped in their own home, 13 per cent of older people (1.26 million) do not go out more than once a week and about 100,000 older people *never* go out. Our evidence suggests that lack of public toilets is a significant contributory factor in the isolation of older people, and the situation will worsen as toilet provision continues to decline.

The cost of this isolation is not just a moral one. If older people are restricted to their own homes they are increasingly likely to suffer from depression, an extremely common condition affecting an estimated 1 in 8 people over the age of 65. The lack of public toilets in places where older people may otherwise take exercise, such as parks and promenades, means that many become inactive.

Physical activity is critical in later life in order to enable older people to remain independent in their own homes for as long as possible. These

factors combine to place an economic burden on local health services that the provision of public toilets could help to avoid or delay. In addition, the absence of public toilets excludes older people from economic activities, such as shopping, which they would otherwise be undertaking, preventing them from engaging in the local economy.

Many of us take for granted the fact that when we need to use a toilet our bodies will give us enough warning to enable us to get to a toilet or allow us to hold on until we can. However, as we age this ability can decrease, and many of us need to use the toilet more often and with a greater degree of urgency. This can make leaving the security of home a stress-laden experience, especially when going somewhere new:

‘I am a wheelchair user who travels into London frequently and it is always an issue – finding a toilet I can manage. I have to plan where I am going to go and if meetings are arranged in unfamiliar venues, it is a real worry, raising anxiety until I find out what the situation is like.’

To alleviate this worry, many people plan in advance where they can go to the toilet and what journeys they can make. Some live in fear of ending up in an embarrassing or humiliating situation, which restricts where, when, how far and for how long they can go out.

'I have a colostomy and have to plan my travel arrangements around toilets so as not to be caught short.'

'For those having to take diuretic tablets every day, one has to plan one's journeys where a toilet can be found.'

'There should be access to a toilet in the main library. I am unable to attend and read and study some days, due to water tablets. I don't take them if I want to read or use the computer in the library.'

Some public toilets are so unacceptable that people would prefer not to drink rather than to have to use a public toilet:

'I don't use public toilets... I limit my fluid intake whenever I'm travelling.'

This can have very serious health consequences, including dehydration and urinary tract infections.

This is not the only respect in which the closure of public toilets has an unintended impact on public health. The benefits of physical activity to everyone, particularly older people, are well documented. Physical activity is a key component of growing old in good health, and walking is the most easily accessible way of taking physical exercise for all. In *Choosing Activity: a physical activity action plan* the

Government recommends that 'older people should take particular care to keep moving and retain their mobility through daily activity'.¹ However, many older people who are used to walking as part of their daily routine find that as they get older their need to use the toilet while out of doors restricts how far they can go.

'Doctors tell the elderly to take a good walk every day, but many including myself and my twin brother carry excessive water. This means we have to urinate whilst out walking, particularly in winter.'

'I, like many others, miss out on the prom walk to Heysham. It is just too far without a toilet.'

These consequences have a serious and profound effect on the quality of life of many older people. Yet very often, when local authorities need to make budget cuts, closing public toilets is seen as a victimless purge. This belief is shown to be without foundation by the overwhelming response to the Help the Aged survey, and the large number of older people's forums and organisations representing other interest groups around the country that are campaigning to keep public toilets open and reverse their decline.

¹ *Choosing Activity: a physical activity action plan*, p7, DCMS & DH, March 2005



Photographer: Liz Artindale

Case study: public toilets in Poole

Our names are Ann and Betty. We are 63 and 72 respectively and both live in Poole, Dorset. We investigated the experience of using toilets in Poole and the surrounding areas for a Help the Aged project. We are both disabled and have access to disabled toilets via a RADAR key which is provided by Poole Council. Ann is registered blind and Betty has Crohn's disease and a colostomy. We also both have limited mobility and walk with the aid of a stick.

Having reasonable access to decent toilet facilities is very important to both of us and plays a key part in enabling us to leave home and get out within our local area.

Our 'toilet top three'

We've each come up with our top three – the things that are most important for us in toilets:

Ann

1. Cleanliness
2. Good lighting
3. Security – feeling safe when using toilets

Betty

1. Cleanliness
2. Access to a handbasin, rather than a hand washer (hole in the wall)
3. Waste bins within the toilet cubicle

Top priority for both of us is cleanliness. This is especially important for disabled people whose immune system is often weakened.

Public toilets in parks, beaches, car parks and those which can be accessed from the street are usually very poor. These are also generally the most unclean toilets to use and often lack facilities such as toilet paper and bins. We feel that they do not appear to be checked and cleaned frequently enough within this area to make them pleasant places to use.

However, we are both able to think of exceptions within the local area.

Toilets in **shops and shopping centres** are among the most pleasant to use. However, we have found some variations. Many smaller shops do not have toilets advertised for use by the public, but we've both found that shop staff are often very helpful when asked and will allow you to use the staff toilet.

Toilets in restaurants, cafés and pubs vary greatly, depending on the owner/manager. Some are among the most pleasant toilets to use. We will often go into a restaurant or café and have something to eat or drink with the main purpose of using decent toilets – if we know they are there.

We find **doctors' surgeries** to be among the best toilets to use when out – almost always being very clean with good facilities. This, of course does depend on them being open. When they are, we've both found that the staff are usually very accommodating in letting you use the toilets when you ask.

Dental surgeries are also very good. However, the staff on the whole seem to be less accommodating – and less likely to allow you to use the facilities unless you talk them into it.

Some general comments and observations

The availability of public toilets seems to be reducing, with many closing down in recent years – or subject to shorter opening hours. The number of toilets for public use within shops and in other commercial or public premises has, we feel, increased during this time. This results in plenty of choice during 'normal' opening hours; however, outside these times choice can be very restricted, especially for toilets which we feel are pleasant or safe to use.

Large toilet rolls are often difficult to use. Locating the end of the toilet paper can be a real issue, especially for people who have limited sight or find it hard to grip. The large roll holder also often

takes up a lot of space within the toilet cubicle (even in larger disabled toilets), making it difficult for someone of limited mobility to manoeuvre.

When you suspect someone of abusing disabled toilets, you do not often feel able to challenge them about this. Particularly frequent checking of disabled toilets in places such as pubs may help to combat this.

If paying for toilets would make them cleaner and more pleasant to use – through funding an attendant or more frequent checking – we'd both be in favour of this. We feel that a fee of either 10p for reasonable toilets or 20p for very good toilets would be acceptable.

When new toilets are being planned and designed, involve people who are likely to have the most need to use them in their design. Frequently, this means disabled people and older people. A few of our thoughts on design:

- Wash hand basins actually in disabled toilet cubicles are very helpful for people with some conditions. However, there should be enough room to ensure that wheelchair users can still negotiate the space

- Toilets are often decorated completely in white. This can be very difficult for someone of limited sight. Contrasting colours, e.g. for door handles, locks, around hand basins etc., can be very helpful
- Ensure that access spaces, corridors etc. are wide enough for all users, including those in wheelchairs
- Be careful about door openings – those which open outwards can often block corridors and access for others
- Some consistency in design would be helpful – especially for people with limited sight who often have trouble finding things like flushes – which can vary greatly from toilet to toilet
- Effective lighting in toilets and in the access routes to them is essential in helping users (particularly those with limited sight) to feel safe and secure

This case study was produced as part of the Investigate mystery shopping research undertaken in 2006 by the Older People's Programme for Help the Aged. Further research findings will be published throughout 2007.

Possible solutions to the lack of facilities

'It is a sad fact that in my lifetime there has been a steady decline [in most local authority areas] in the extent and quality of provision. Time was when many municipalities prided themselves on having the best, and most generously provided for toilets in the area. Now it seems they are constructed as small as possible and the emphasis is all on saving money. The public deserves better.'

A number of initiatives aim to assist people in accessing public toilets.

National Key Scheme

The disability network RADAR administers a National Key Scheme that allows people who are disabled to apply for a key which opens 7,000 public toilets around the country. These

are kept locked to prevent them from vandalism and misuse. However, many older people who would benefit from minor adjustments do not consider themselves disabled and therefore do not access this scheme.

'The toilets in Darwen and Blackburn are few and far between and if you are not disabled and have not got a key you are at a disadvantage.'

As society ages, there will be more and more people who do not consider themselves disabled but for whom slight changes in the built environment would be of enormous benefit. Hand rails that help people lift themselves on to and off the toilet seat are an example of a simple modification that could be made to a public toilet to make it more accessible for older people. Both disabled and non-disabled toilets would benefit from wastepaper bins inside the cubicles to allow people using continence products to dispose of these in privacy.



'Just can't wait' card

Many respondents to our survey referred to the 'just can't

wait!' card, which is available

to people who suffer from incontinence and can be presented to people who have toilet facilities which are not open to the public, explaining that they need to use a toilet urgently.

Although some older people are medically incontinent, many others have continence issues but do not consider themselves incontinent, and therefore do not take part in this card scheme.

People need public toilets to preserve their dignity

A very large number of people felt that using the toilet should be a private and anonymous experience – they did not want to have to ask someone for a key, or explain to someone that their need is urgent, but felt that public toilets should be provided, open and easy to use.

Having to ask for permission to use the toilet removes from people some of the personal choice and control that adults are afforded in other areas of their life, causes people to worry that their request will be refused and extend the time it will take them to find a toilet they can use, and erodes the dignity that everyone has the right to. Survey respondents felt that more care should be taken when choosing the type and location of new public toilet facilities:

'Some of the toilets in Manchester are of a new type that looks like a metal kiosk. I do not know how these work and so have not been able to use them. I feel embarrassed to stand and try to find a way in.'

'While we still need public toilets, please do not give us those big black boxes that remind me of Dr Who's tardis. They are so in-your-face. If they are engaged you have to wait out on the pavement – so embarrassing.'

'The new toilet cubicles provided, especially the one on Foregate Street, is not private. Everyone can see you going in.'

Who should provide public toilets?

Cambridge City Council agreed in 2001 that public toilets would be one of its priorities, and agreed not to close any more, pledging £1 million worth of investment over four years. It worked in partnership with the police to reduce anti-social behaviour, used vandal-resistant fixtures and fittings, and held competitions with local architects to make the designs innovative.

In addition to committing money, Cambridge City Council has included public toilets in its best-value indicators according to which it evaluates how effectively it serves the public, set itself targets and included monitoring by the British Toilet Association.

However, there are many examples across the country of local authorities which, needing to make budget cuts, have closed down all their public toilets without providing any alternative.

Solihull Council stirred up a storm of controversy after taking the decision to close all its public toilets in order to save £210,000 towards its £7 million budget cut target. Residents fought the decision, which was taken without consultation, but to no avail.

Solihull Council recommended that residents use shops and businesses when they are out and about and need the toilet. However, many pubs, bars and restaurants have signs up saying that their toilets are for the use of customers only. The Council's suggestion was extremely unpopular with many residents, and in our survey older people across the country raised objections to having to use the facilities in private businesses:

'I for one feel embarrassed when I am not buying anything.'

'After shops and malls close there are no public toilets available.'

'I have to buy a drink to find a toilet in Stourbridge – I have had to pay £1.70 to spend a penny in one coffee bar!!'

'The council should not expect private businesses to provide facilities for the general public – nor put the general public in this awkward situation.'

However, a number of respondents to our survey felt that the UK should have a more open culture of allowing people to use toilets in private businesses without feeling embarrassed or obliged to buy anything.

'There should be a campaign to encourage restaurants, cafés and hotels and pubs to welcome the use of their toilets by non-patrons, as is the case in Paris and other European cities.'

Others already feel comfortable about going into shops to use their loos.

'I have a mental list of big stores which provide facilities.'

84 per cent of respondents to our survey felt that shops and businesses should make more effort to provide toilet facilities for the public to use

Yet there are many older people, particularly the most vulnerable, who would feel intimidated going into a private business solely to use the facilities.

In 2004 the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames developed a Community Toilet Scheme to combat the problem of its declining and dilapidated public toilets. Through this scheme the council recruits local businesses to allow the

public to use their toilets without having to buy anything. The council provides signs advertising the business's toilet to passers-by, and in return pays the owner £600 per year for maintenance.

The council found it easy to get businesses to sign up, and many owners found that the scheme was beneficial as the increased footfall due to people using their toilets led to an increase in sales. One-third of the businesses in Richmond's community toilet scheme have disabled access, and as they are open during business hours they are always staffed, alleviating safety concerns.

However, this scheme on its own may not meet all users' needs. In the evenings, after cafés and shops have closed, provision is largely limited to pubs and bars. This can be problematic, as one older woman told us:

'Going into pubs on your own is not desirable.'

Facilities under the scheme are restricted to shopping areas, and additional provision must therefore be made in park areas and other places where older people go.

Some people may also feel that going into a private business to use the toilet impacts on their ability to use the toilet with anonymity, privacy and dignity.

Many of the people who responded to our survey felt very strongly that there should be a duty placed on local authorities to provide adequate public toilets for the community.

'Public toilets are not as convenient, clean and accessible as they should be! It is time that local authorities take serious notice of it and do something about it.'

'Perhaps there should be a special allocation from central government to create a national standard for public conveniences, something the country could be proud of and a contribution to public health.'

Other people felt that large stores and transport providers should contribute, and that it should be a planning condition that new developments have adequate toilet facilities.

A very large proportion of those who responded to our survey said that they would



Photograph: Help the Aged

be happy to pay a nominal amount to have public toilets staffed, clean and in a good state of repair.

'I would rather pay 20p like at the train stations and them be clean and manned, than dirty and free.'

Public toilet provision should be tailored to the needs of the users in the area, constantly monitored to ensure that it is meeting needs and sufficient to ensure that older people are not left isolated or constrained by a bladder leash. The government has a responsibility to its older citizens to ensure that this basic right is met.

Recommendations

82 per cent of respondents told us that public toilet provision in their area does not meet their needs

While on some aspects of provision there were differences of opinion, the vast majority told us that toilets in their area are inadequate and more needs to be done.

Help the Aged recommends that the Government commit to commissioning a regular national mapping exercise to ascertain where toilet facilities are declining. This exercise used to be undertaken by the Audit Commission, and since it stopped campaigners estimate that provision has spiralled downwards.

Local authorities should strive for excellence in public toilet provision, and involve local people and older people's forums in monitoring standards to ensure that their needs are being met. Performance indicators for opening times, provision and quality should be set.

Under no circumstances should public toilets be closed without consultation with local residents, and without due consideration to providing an alternative.

New developments such as transport interchanges, shopping centres and supermarkets should include toilet facilities in order to be accessible to all.

Adequate public toilet provision can make an enormous difference to an older person, allowing them to retain an active independent life. For centuries people have taken public toilet provision for granted, yet now that right is under threat. Action must be taken to reverse the trend towards the disappearance of the local authority-provided toilet facility.

Local authorities should take pride in and responsibility for ensuring that vulnerable members of society are not excluded from taking part in their communities due to inadequate public toilet provision.

Methodology

A survey was sent out to older people's forums via two Help the Aged publications, *Activate* and *Policy Update*.² Some monitoring data was included on the questionnaire which enables us to provide the following breakdown of respondents:

Residency

- 80 per cent of respondents live in England
- 7 per cent of respondents live in Scotland
- 10 per cent of respondents live in Wales
- 3 per cent of respondents live in Northern Ireland
- 70 per cent of respondents live in rural areas
- 30 per cent of respondents live in urban areas

Personal

- 15 per cent of respondents were aged 59 and under
- 26 per cent of respondents were aged 60–69
- 37 per cent of respondents were aged 70–79
- 20 per cent of respondents were aged 80–89
- 2 per cent of respondents were aged 90 and over
- 32 per cent of respondents were male
- 68 per cent of respondents were female

2 To subscribe to either of these free publications please email info@helptheaged.org.uk

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One year on from its 2005 report *In the Right Place*, which made a series of recommendations to transport planners to improve access and local services for older people, Help the Aged reviews progress. Despite some encouraging signs, and improved awareness of the issues, the research reveals a depressing lack of action to address the problems.

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