

**Submission
No 15**

INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC TOILETS

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Introduction

This submission is provided in response to the inquiry initiated by Portfolio Committee No. 8 – Customer Service to assess the provision, design, accessibility, inclusivity, and regulation of public toilets across New South Wales (NSW). Public toilets play a crucial role in promoting public health, ensuring safety, and fostering inclusivity in public spaces. Accessible and well-maintained toilets enhance the quality of life for all, especially for vulnerable groups such as the elderly, people with disabilities, parents with young children, and those with medical conditions. This submission highlights key challenges, outlines best practices from other regions, and provides recommendations to improve public toilet infrastructure across NSW.

1. Provision of Public Toilets

Access to public toilets across NSW remains inconsistent, particularly in high-traffic urban areas and rural communities. The lack of sufficient public toilet facilities in key areas, combined with the uneven geographic distribution of existing facilities, has created accessibility gaps that affect residents and visitors alike.

Key Issues:

Inadequate numbers in busy areas: High-traffic public spaces, such as parks, transport hubs, and shopping districts, often do not have enough public toilets to meet demand.

Poor distribution in rural and remote areas: There is a lack of public toilets along major highways and in regional towns, which causes inconvenience for long-distance travelers and residents in these areas.

Private premises with public access: While many private businesses provide toilets, they often restrict access to customers, leaving many people without essential amenities.

Recommendations:

Mandatory toilet provision in urban developments: Require the inclusion of public toilets in all new major urban and transport projects, particularly in high-traffic zones.

Better distribution in regional areas: Increase public toilet availability in rural towns and along major travel routes to ensure equitable access across the state.

Partnership with private businesses: Encourage private businesses to allow unrestricted access to their facilities for the public, possibly through incentives or subsidies.

2. Design, Accessibility, and Inclusivity

The design and accessibility of public toilets must cater to the diverse needs of the population, ensuring that facilities are inclusive for everyone. Many existing public toilets in NSW lack adequate features to support individuals with disabilities, parents, and gender-diverse users, compromising inclusivity and access.

Key Issues:

Lack of accessibility: Many public toilets do not meet modern accessibility standards for individuals with mobility issues, such as appropriate ramps, wheelchair access, or signage.

Exclusivity due to gendered design: Traditional male/female toilet facilities can exclude non-binary and transgender individuals, creating additional barriers for public use.

Safety concerns: Insufficient lighting, lack of emergency call buttons, and poor cleanliness can create unsafe environments, particularly for women, children, and the elderly.

Recommendations:

Universal design principles: Implement universal design standards in all new public toilets, ensuring they are accessible for people with disabilities, parents with young children, and elderly individuals.

Gender-neutral facilities: Increase the provision of gender-neutral toilets to cater to transgender and non-binary individuals, promoting inclusivity.

Safety improvements: Install proper lighting, emergency buttons, and regular maintenance schedules to improve the safety and cleanliness of public toilets.

3. Maintenance and Cleanliness

Public toilets are often subject to poor maintenance and cleanliness, leading to unsanitary conditions that deter their use and pose public health risks. Inconsistent cleaning schedules, vandalism, and insufficient supplies (e.g., toilet paper, soap) are common complaints from users.

Key Issues:

Inconsistent cleaning schedules: Many high-traffic public toilets are not cleaned frequently enough, leading to unhygienic conditions.

Vandalism and lack of supplies: Broken fixtures, graffiti, and the absence of basic supplies like soap and toilet paper are prevalent, especially in high-use areas.

No real-time monitoring: There are no systems in place to provide real-time information about maintenance needs, leading to delays in repairs or cleaning.

Recommendations:

Stricter maintenance contracts: Introduce regular cleaning schedules, particularly for public toilets in high-traffic areas, and ensure these schedules are strictly followed.

Technology-driven solutions: Use IoT sensors to monitor supplies and cleanliness in real time, allowing for faster maintenance responses and better allocation of resources.

Budget allocation for maintenance: Ensure sufficient funding is allocated to maintain public toilets at consistent levels of cleanliness and functionality.

4. Regulation and Funding

Public toilet provision and maintenance are currently governed by local councils, leading to inconsistencies across different regions. Furthermore, inadequate funding, particularly in rural areas, has resulted in a lack of accessible and well-maintained public toilets.

Key Issues:

Inconsistent regulations across NSW: There are no uniform standards for the provision, maintenance, or design of public toilets across the state.

Lack of sustainable funding models: Local councils often lack the necessary funds to build and maintain adequate public toilet facilities, particularly in regional and rural areas.

Recommendations:

Statewide regulatory framework: Establish a statewide standard for public toilet design, accessibility, and maintenance, ensuring consistency across NSW.

Sustainable funding models: Create a funding model that involves both public and private sector contributions to support the construction and maintenance of public toilets.

Commercial development levies: Introduce a levy on large commercial developments to fund the provision of public toilets in underserved areas, ensuring adequate facilities are available.

5. Best Practices from Other Jurisdictions

Many regions globally have successfully addressed the challenges of public toilet provision through innovative strategies. NSW can benefit from adopting these best practices to improve the availability and quality of public toilets across the state.

Examples of Best Practices:

San Francisco's Pit Stop Program: Mobile, staffed public toilets are stationed in high-need areas, improving sanitation and safety while reducing public defecation.

Japan's Transparent Toilets Initiative: Public toilets with transparent walls that become opaque when occupied address safety concerns and improve the aesthetic of public spaces.

United Kingdom's Community Toilet Scheme: Businesses are encouraged to make their toilets available to the public, improving access in areas with limited public facilities.

Recommendations:

Mobile public toilets: Pilot a mobile public toilet program in high-traffic or underserved areas to provide temporary but essential facilities.

Smart toilet technologies: Explore the use of smart toilets that improve safety and cleanliness, incorporating features such as occupancy indicators, automatic cleaning, and real-time monitoring of conditions.

Community toilet scheme: Collaborate with businesses to open their toilets to the public, providing incentives for those who participate and ensuring adequate signage and mapping of available facilities.

6. Public Toilets on Major Highways

There is a severe shortage of public toilets along major highways in NSW, which poses health and safety risks for long-distance travelers. The absence of regular rest areas with accessible toilet facilities along highways impacts families, elderly individuals, and those with medical conditions.

Key Issues:

Long distances between facilities: Many major highways lack public toilet facilities, leaving long stretches without access to essential amenities.

Limited 24/7 access: Highway rest areas often close during late hours, leaving travelers without accessible toilet facilities when they are most needed.

Recommendations:

Mandatory facilities on highways: Establish a requirement for public toilets to be provided at regular intervals (every 60-80 kilometers) along all major highways.

24/7 access and safety features: Ensure that these highway rest stops are open 24/7 and are well-lit, safe, and accessible to individuals with disabilities, parents, and elderly travelers.

Clear signage and information: Provide clear signage along highways indicating the location of upcoming toilet facilities and ensure that they are consistently maintained and available.

7. Public Toilet Locator App

In addition to improving the physical infrastructure of public toilets, a digital solution can enhance the accessibility and usability of these facilities. A public toilet locator app would allow residents, visitors, and travelers to easily find nearby public toilets, view real-time updates on availability, and access important information about cleanliness and accessibility.

Key Features of the App:

Real-time location services: The app should use GPS to show the nearest public toilets, with filters for accessibility, gender-neutral options, and baby-changing facilities.

User feedback and reviews: Allow users to provide feedback on cleanliness and safety, helping authorities identify maintenance needs and ensure quality.

Real-time updates: The app should integrate with IoT sensors in public toilets to provide real-time updates on the availability of facilities and supplies such as soap and toilet paper.

Offline access: Ensure the app functions offline so that users in areas with poor network coverage can still find nearby toilet facilities.

Recommendations:

Develop a public toilet locator app: NSW should create a government-supported public toilet locator app, making it easy for users to find facilities across the state.

Comprehensive filters: Include filters for accessible, gender-neutral, and family-friendly facilities, helping users find toilets that meet their specific needs.

Feedback and maintenance integration: Integrate real-time maintenance updates and allow users to provide feedback to improve the overall quality and cleanliness of public toilet facilities.

Conclusion

Public toilets are essential infrastructure for ensuring public health, safety, and inclusivity across New South Wales. This inquiry presents an opportunity to improve the provision, design, accessibility, and maintenance of public toilets, benefiting all residents and visitors. By adopting the recommendations outlined in this submission, NSW can enhance public toilet infrastructure, ensuring it meets the needs of a diverse population and contributes to a more inclusive and accessible society.