

INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC TOILETS

Organisation: Narrabri Shire Council

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NARRABRI SHIRE COUNCIL ABN. 95 717 801 656

46-48 Maitland Street
PO Box 261, Narrabri NSW 2390
www.narrabri.nsw.gov.au

P. (02) 6799 6866
F. (02) 6799 6888
E. council@narrabri.nsw.gov.au



LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 8 – CUSTOMER SERVICE INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC TOILETS

NARRABRI SHIRE COUNCIL SUBMISSION REPORT

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Introduction & Background

It is understood that the following terms of reference (ToRs) are applicable to the current review process:

Portfolio Committee No. 8 – Customer Service inquire into and report on public toilets, and in particular:

- (a) the provision, design, accessibility and inclusivity of public toilets across New South Wales, including toilets provided in public places and toilets provided for the use of members of the public in private premises accessed by the public,*
- (b) state, national and international best practice for the provision and maintenance of public toilets,*
- (c) the regulation of, and funding for, public toilets in New South Wales and whether new standards, guidelines, funding models, legislation or other forms of regulation are warranted; and*
- (d) any other related matters.*

Local Context

Narrabri Shire is a [local government area](#) in the [North West Slopes](#) region of NSW. The primary settlement of Narrabri is located adjacent to the [Namoi River](#) and at the confluence of the [Newell](#) and [Kamilaroi Highways](#). The local government area (LGA) is strategically positioned halfway between Sydney and Brisbane, and is considered to be resource-rich. Key local industries include mining and agriculture. At the last census (2021) the resident population was 12,721 persons.

Narrabri Shire Council's vision is articulated in the Community Strategic Plan as follows:

"Narrabri Shire will be a strong and vibrant regional growth centre providing a quality living environment for the entire Shire community."

The township of Narrabri is considered to be one of the most flood prone settlements in NSW. The community of Wee Waa, located west of Narrabri, is periodically completely isolated by flood waters for long periods (up to two weeks) and is protected by a ring levee. Narrabri Shire contains a number of vulnerable and at-risk communities that are flood-affected. These communities have a high Aboriginal population, low socio-economic base and are also ageing in nature. Narrabri Shire is a socially disadvantaged community with a SEIFA Score of 936 and a corresponding SEIFA Rank of 200 (Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD)).

Like many rural and regional Councils, Narrabri Shire Council has ageing infrastructure and there are ongoing challenges with long term financial sustainability. For Narrabri Shire Council alone, it is estimated that Council has direct responsibility for the ongoing care and maintenance of 16 public toilet facilities located across an LGA with a geographical area of 13,031 km². The average cost of maintenance of such facilities is in excess of over \$300,000 per annum with a corresponding service level of two 'cleans' per day.

Community engagement recently conducted as part of Council's CSP revealed a high rate of community need for more accessible and strategically positioned public toilets. The feedback further outlined that public toilets have a range of additional needs and requirements.

Response to the Committee Terms of Reference

For the purpose of this submission, public toilets refer to any toilet that is located outside of the private home. This is principally broken down into two categories.

1. Those primarily provided by local governments located in parks, sporting fields, public swimming pools and public spaces.
2. Publicly accessible toilets provided by businesses for customers and visitors such as those located in offices, factories, service stations, shopping centres and food outlets, etc.

The provision of a network of safe, accessible and inclusive public toilets is critical to ensure community participation for all residents and visitors across Australia.

Narrabri Shire Council provides the following feedback to the Committee in line with the corresponding terms of reference:

(a) the provision, design, accessibility and inclusivity of public toilets across New South Wales, including toilets provided in public places and toilets provided for the use of members of the public in private premises accessed by the public)

Public toilets are commonly considered as facilities to eliminate bodily waste but are actually used for a range of activities. They can include the following:

- Administration of medication.
- Menstruation management.
- Care for young children.
- Breastfeeding of infants.
- Drinking water access.
- General personal hygiene.
- Sharps disposal.

- Facilities for the homeless.

Therefore, it is evident that public toilets are utilised for multiple functions which constitute an essential public service. However, despite being an essential public service, toilets are consistently neglected at all stages from design, construction, location, cleaning and maintenance and general public space management. Further, this translates to the majority of planning authorities who do not have toilet provisions within a broader planning framework. This despite the fact that a lack of provision can undermine health policies, social inclusion, economic development and environmental sustainability. A lack of coordinated access across NSW to public toilets has been the result of working with limited provisioning.

Council principally assesses, determines and regulates building works in Australia against the National Construction Code 2022 and the Australian Standards. The National Construction Code 2022 sets out the requirements for the design and construction of buildings in Australia whereas the Australian Standards identifies how to achieve compliance by design. Within the code, there is a requirement to identify the quantity and design of toilet facilities required within each building classification, being either residential or commercial.

There is a common mindset within local government that public toilets are a liability as opposed to an asset. As stated, public toilets are critical to achieve positive health, tourism and economic development outcomes. This negative mindset results in public toilets being managed down to reduce usability which can mean removing mirrors, soap, dryers and toilet seats.

Across Australia public toilets come in all shapes, sizes and standards of quality. In regional locations, due to less population, it is not unusual for toilets to be lacking in modern requirements such as being accessible, possessing limited ventilation, having no disabled access, being poorly illuminated, and potentially hazardous to users with damaged infrastructure.

Whereas older toilet blocks have doors to enter the facility as well as the cubicle, modern design eliminates the main door access with labyrinth or off-set entrance maze to increase hands-free toilet accessibility and hygiene and still allow privacy and separation from the outside.

Ideally a well-designed public toilet should be:

1. Clean and dry.
2. Well ventilated.
3. Easy to maintain.
4. Have a thoughtfully planned layout in line with accepted standards.
5. Friendly to persons with disabilities and accessibility/inclusivity needs.
6. Designed with consideration of the overall life of the asset and corresponding servicing levels in addition to whole of life costs.

By carefully planning a public toilet facility consideration should be given to the following aspects:

- Strategic positioning of the overall facility/installation.
- Layout.
- Entrances.
- Lighting.
- Materials.
- Urinals.
- Cubicles.
- Wash basins.
- Taps (preferably sensor).
- Soap dispensers.
- Sanitary fittings.
- Hand dryers / paper towel dispensers.
- Disability access.
- Ventilation.
- Nappy changing area.
- Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) considerations.

Recommendations:

- **Best Practice Guidelines:** being developed to guide planning and decision-making in respect of public toilets.

(b) state, national and international best practice for the provision and maintenance of public toilets

Design and construction are one part of the provision of a toilet facility. The other is the ongoing maintenance, which, depending on the lifespan of the toilet will be many multiples of the original construction cost.

Original design considerations should be implemented that will allow for all ongoing cleaning and repairs and maintenance be as efficient as possible. These are both time and cost savings.

Universal Design is an international design technique which creates public and private spaces that is able to be accessed equally by individuals of all ages and abilities. In an effort to get a level of continuity in toilets globally, Universal Design is the standards that are endeavoured to be achieved. Universal design goes beyond just guests in wheelchairs, but is a design principle to accommodate a range of needs, inclusive of the following:

- Mobility equipment including, for example, wheelchairs, walkers, canes, crutches and scooters.
- Balance issues.
- Height to accommodate the very tall to very short in stature.
- Weight.
- Strength and flexibility to accommodate people with debilitating health conditions such as arthritis.
- People who require assistance from caregivers.
- Accommodating individuals with visual impairments.

For the sake of continuity and inclusiveness, it is considered that it is time to apply Universal Design principles to all new public toilets and retrofitting toilets, wherever reasonably practicable. By broadening who is included in public toilet design through thoughtful stakeholder engagement, all members of the community can access public toilets.

Councils are not just responsible for the infrastructure that is required to construct a standalone toilet block. After construction, Councils are required to clean daily, provide consumables including toilet paper and hand towels, empty sharps bins and dispose of personal hygiene bins. Additionally, ongoing repairs and maintenance are required to have the facilities working efficiently particularly when facilities are routinely subject to vandalism and damage. However, each toilet block is not independent of anything else. They are also connected to Councils water infrastructure and sewerage pipe network that transports waste to a sewerage treatment plant for further treatment. Costs for a toilet block should not

be considered in isolation but as a part of a much bigger network of ageing infrastructure and running costs.

Recommendations:

- **Application of Universal Design Principles:** Consider opportunities to introduce universal design principles as part of associated best practice.

(c) the regulation of, and funding for, public toilets in NSW and whether new standards, guidelines, funding models, legislation or other forms of regulation are warranted

The following is an extract from the publication ***We Need to Talk About Public Toilets***:

“Currently in Australia, public toilet provision primarily sits within public health, asset management and compliance frameworks. At a Federal level, the Health Department manages the National Continence Program which supports the prevention and management of incontinence. One element of the program is the National Public Toilet Map which allows users to find and locate a toilet. The online map, available via website and mobile phone app, allows users to plan a trip by providing information relating to accessibility, opening hours and facilities of over 19,000 public and publicly accessible toilets across Australia.

State and territory governments also have public health provisions relating to public toilets, several of which delegate responsibility to local governments for maintaining public health and sanitation. Local governments have a variety of responsibilities for public toilets, their provision and maintenance in parks and other public spaces and buildings; sewerage and water infrastructure that supports public toilets; as well as public health compliance. Yet, there is no legislative requirement in Australia for ensuring the adequate supply of public access to toilets located outside of the home.

When public toilets are provided, they must be designed and constructed to meet national standards, yet the standards do not necessarily lead to equitable outcomes. The National Construction Code provides guidance on the number of toilets that must be provided in buildings, based on the function and use of the building; an estimation of the number of occupants, divided by sex; and their specific needs such as disability. The rigid application of this code contributes to long waiting lines for women, who, on average, take longer to use a toilet due to clothing, caring responsibilities, menstruation or pregnancy. In addition, these national standards only apply to certain categories of buildings, and not to those in public spaces such as parks.

Australian standards relating to accessibility provide the design criteria that toilets must meet. These are regularly reviewed and updated to reflect changes in community needs and expectations. However, a result of the changing standards is that once built, facilities can quickly become outdated, and there are limitations on how an already constructed toilet can be modified to respond to changing community needs and expectations. Updating toilet facilities to stay in line with existing standards and community expectations requires substantial financial investment, yet buildings are not required to remain compliant. Clearer definition of responsibility for provision is required to ensure a coordinated network of public toilets across public spaces.

Public spaces frameworks

Opportunities to integrate public toilets into planning frameworks can harness the benefits public toilets provide to improving the activation and inclusion of public spaces. Currently in Australia, key planning documents for the design and management of public spaces exclude toilets. The Australian Infrastructure Audit 2019: An Assessment of Australia's Future Infrastructure Needs only includes one reference to toilets outside of the home, and this relates to female-friendly toilets and changerooms for sporting use. Other planning policies and frameworks such as state government urban design and open space guidelines, while focusing on public spaces and liveability, fail to address the importance of toilets in making public spaces inclusive and usable. There are no desired standards of service for toilets in our economic centres, suburbs, parks or other outdoor places of gathering. This provides a lack of guidance to indicate how many toilets are needed or the best location to meet community needs.

Policy recommendations

To ensure that public toilets are adequately considered and provided in public spaces to support inclusion and participation, the following are recommended:

1. National public toilet principles

The adoption of national public toilet principles to prioritise the planning, design and maintenance of public toilets in public spaces across cities and suburbs in Australia. This will engage planners, architects and designers as well as chambers of commerce and businesses through articulating the value and benefits of access to public toilets.

2. Planning and provision responsibility

Define the responsibility for the planning and provision of public toilets which brings together an understanding of the stakeholders involved in the provision and maintenance of public toilets. Embed public toilets in public health legislation, including articulating clear roles and responsibilities to assess local needs across local government areas, open space and transport networks, which includes:

- i. *Acknowledgement that access to toilets is a right and supports inclusion and dignity;*
- ii. *An audit of the existing provision of toilets that can be accessed by the public, regardless of ownership or management;*
- iii. *Community engagement to determine local needs; and*
- iv. *Collaborative responses to the provision and maintenance of public toilets."*

A copy of the publication *We Need to Talk About Public Toilets: Policy Agendas for inclusive suburbs and cities* (Webber, 2018) can be accessed from: [PolicyFutures2021 Webber.pdf](#)

Katherine Webber in *Everyone, everywhere, everyday: A case for expanding universal design to public toilets* as presented at the 2021 Universal Design Conference held in Melbourne also notes that public toilets are spaces that can benefit from the application of universal design processes. She states that research conducted as part of a Churchill Fellowship found that the current design and provision of public toilets are failing many different population groups. A range of barriers means that people's access to toilets can be restricted, which impacts how and when they can use the public spaces that the toilets are located in. Centring the needs of a diverse range of user groups in the design and delivery of public toilets can support access and inclusion. Webber's article proposes that applying the 'Public Toilet Design Principles', would expand universal design to public toilets in Australia.

The initiation of a funding program for all Councils to be able to undertake a Public Toilet Strategy for their individual Local Government Areas (LGAs) is recommended. Furthermore, an infrastructure funding program should be established, dedicated to upgrade the existing NSW public toilet network or construct new toilets to Universal Design standards.

Council strongly objects to any legislation which would result in cost-shifting to local government. Any policy reform programs should fully consider the challenges regarding the ongoing financial sustainability of NSW Councils and thus should be under an 'opt in' basis.

Recommendations:

- **Adoption of National Public Toilet Principles:** to prioritise the planning, design and ongoing maintenance of public toilets and engaging with key stakeholders throughout the process design.
- **Undertake an audit of all public toilets:** to identify location and condition of assets.
- **Initiate a Public Toilet Strategy Funding Program:** to facilitate completion of public toilet strategies.
- **Establish an infrastructure funding program:** to upgrade current public toilet facilities or construct new facilities to Universal Design Standards.

(d) any other related matters


As detailed in the preceding section, the inquiry presents an unprecedented opportunity for the NSW Government, jointly funded with the Commonwealth Government, to undertake, an audit on all public toilets to identify location, standards and conditions, proximity to other toilets, functions, running and whole of life costs and services. This initiative could augment to, or further support, the National Public Toilet Map, per www.toiletmap.gov.au.

Conclusion

Council thanks the Committee for the opportunity to provide feedback on this important issue. Council would be pleased to provide additional information and context in support of this submission, as required.

Should you require any further information or clarification in this regard you are invited to contact Council's Director Planning and Sustainability, Ms Donna Ausling at _____ or by emailing council@narrabri.nsw.gov.au.

Yours faithfully,

Eloise Chaplain 
Interim General Manager

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