



Briefing: Public toilet planning: an inconvenient imperative for local governments

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Summary

Toilets are critical public infrastructure, but their provision is declining in many major cities. Beyond meeting our basic needs, effective provision and design of public toilets can help to achieve a range of local government objectives

As with planning for other types of community facilities, public toilet network planning is an important process for local governments to undertake. The strategic planning process can also explore methods of overcoming barriers to effective provision – including funding. This briefing explores these issues and argues for the development of local public toilet strategies.

This briefing will be of interest to local council staff and councillors pursuing greater accessibility and inclusion, environmental sustainability, economic prosperity, health and wellbeing, recreation participation, and walkability of their communities.

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Briefing in full

Public toilets then and now

Modern public toilets were introduced as a way to make cities more sanitary, reduce instances of indecency, and cater to the needs of working men in city centres.

Melbourne's first public toilet was installed in 1859 (for men – [women had to wait another 43 years](#)), and eight of the [original cast iron urinals](#) still stand in the Melbourne CBD, alongside fully-automated toilets. There are now over 17,000 toilets listed on Australia's [National Public Toilet Map](#). Toilets are the only facility that will be universally needed (and used) by every member of the community if they spend enough time in public spaces. They cater to all people – residents, workers, visitors, and those experiencing homelessness – and can improve use of open space and promote access and inclusion. Access to adequate toilets is enshrined in the UN [Sustainable Development Goals](#) as an essential component of a prosperous society, and toilets now even have [their own international day](#).

But for something so important, public toilets often fall short of meeting our most basic of needs – they often can't be found when we need them, are sometimes unsanitary or inaccessible, and may be perceived as unsafe and unattractive. They're also disappearing in many major cities in the US, UK, and Australia as local authorities contend with the unenviable task of spending increasingly constrained budgets. Public toilets provided by local government in the UK fell [19 per cent from 2015 to 2021](#), and the British Toilet Association [estimates](#) the total reduction of public conveniences over the last 10 years at 50 per cent. A [recent report](#) highlights the dire consequences of this decline in the UK, and a [2021 survey](#) confirmed that the overwhelming majority (91 per cent) of Londoners do not feel that the existing provision meets their needs.

In Australia, the City of Sydney's 2014 Public Toilet Strategy acknowledged that the City was still characterised by a lack of access at some key locations and that public urination can be a problem in entertainment precincts. Spend an extended period of time in one of our capital cities today – especially after dark – and you'll likely find yourself popping into the nearest bar or café to purchase access to this convenience for the price of a drink.

Flush with benefits

The way toilets are provided in many urban areas today exposes how many

planners and policymakers view them – at best, as an afterthought. If we're to be human in public, we need a place to go. This is reason enough to provide adequate public facilities, but closer examination of the impact of these humble facilities reveals that they sit at the intersection of a number of complex challenges, and can help achieve a range of objectives that span across the full gamut of council strategies and departments:

Use of public open space: Toilet provision ensures that our parks and other public spaces for recreation and socialisation can become destinations, helping to drive participation. [Everyone Can Play](#) is the guide to creating inclusive playspaces developed by the NSW Government for local governments and other providers. It has been utilised as a best-practice toolkit for creating any family-friendly public open spaces, not only playspaces, and not only in NSW. It is based on 3 questions: 'Can I get there?', 'Can I play?', and 'Can I stay?'. The guide identifies toilets as a supporting amenity that allows playspace/park users to stay for as long as they like.

Walkability: Toilet provision enables walkability of our urban areas, but is usually left out of [WalkScore](#) and similar metrics which consider the level of day-to-day tasks that can be completed without a car. Although our homes and many of our destinations (e.g. workplaces, the grocery store, schools) include their own facilities, toilets are an essential component that should be included in end-of-trip facilities as well as at appropriate intervals along the way, encouraging people to make journeys through communities on foot or on a bike.

Accessibility and inclusion: Failure to provide public toilets can be detrimental to any member of the population, but it is the elderly, people living with illness or a disability, people who menstruate, parents and carers, and people who are gender-diverse who are most vulnerable to being excluded from public life by toilet infrastructure. For the [1 in 4 Australians with incontinence](#) or the more than [80,000 with an inflammatory bowel disease](#), movements may be limited to areas with ready access to toilets – keeping them on a ['loo leash'](#). Parents of young children often experience this same phenomenon. The traditional split-gender toilet block illustrates how design can also exclude. Gender-neutral/unisex facilities built on universal design principles can greatly improve accessibility to people with a physical disability and people who identify as non-binary or transgender, all while avoiding the challenge of achieving ['potty parity'](#) – equal access for male and female users. For those with more profound disabilities, [Changing Places](#) and [Marveloo](#) facilities enable participation in local community that may otherwise not be possible.

Homelessness support: Similarly, for people experiencing homelessness who do not have their own facilities, free, 24-hour access is an everyday necessity. Limited access can mean that those sleeping rough are forced to spend a significant portion of their day searching out adequate facilities, and leaves them vulnerable to having to relieve themselves on public streets. For this population, the added provision of shower facilities can mean the difference between exclusion or participation in the workforce, social activities, and other aspects of everyday life.

Tourism and economic development: Public toilets are an important contributor to the viability of the night-time economy and tourism. As any road-tripper can vouch, toilets can make or break a travel experience, and are often the simple reason a traveller may end up in one stopover destination over another – and stimulate the local economy while they're there. One regional Australian town [reported](#) that a \$3000 investment in improving their welcome centre toilets generated increased visitation to the visitor centre as well as its product sales. In urban areas like Melbourne where events abound, a buzzing after-hours entertainment, arts and culture, and food and drink scene is not possible without after-dark toilet access.

In addition to the benefits highlighted here, a great public toilet network can contribute to environmental sustainability, safety, and smart city objectives of the communities they serve.

Why plan for public toilets?

While there is no legislative requirement for Australian local governments to provide toilet facilities outside those included in certain classes of buildings, the majority of provision and management has historically fallen on councils as they seek to fulfil their social and corporate responsibility to support the health and wellbeing of their communities. While the Australian Federal Government maintains the National Public Toilet Map, state governments typically overlook toilets – Victoria's 300-page [Infrastructure Strategy 2021-2051](#) contains one solitary reference to toilets in the context of pedestrian infrastructure.

Local governments typically prepare strategies and plans that concern other types of Council buildings – sport and recreation facilities, libraries, maternal and child health, and other community services. Indeed, these are likely what comes to mind for most people when considering a council's remit and contribution to the public realm and network of services, but asset registers often reveal that the infrastructure type that comprises the largest share of Council buildings is public toilets. The public

toilet is also unique in that it is the only social infrastructure typology that does not draw people into the public realm in its own right. Demand for public toilets is therefore based on convenience to other facilities and community spaces, and there are no population-based standards for provision.

Overcoming barriers to provision

Funding is likely the most common barrier to effective provision. Authorities around the world have implemented a number of innovative solutions to supplement public funds and facilities to provide a strong toilet network.

One such solution for areas with commercial precincts is a **Community Toilet Scheme (CTS)**, a partnership between local government and local businesses that extends use of private toilets to non-customers during business hours. This access is provided in exchange for cleaning and maintenance services, provision of goods such as soap and paper, free publicity/promotion, even payment or a reduction in fees or rates from the local council. This model has seen success in Germany, with one city **reporting** that the annual program costs are a fraction of the likely investment costs of running their own network.

Increasingly, public toilets and other associated street furniture are being used as platforms for static and digital advertising. In fact, it was JCDecaux (the major outdoor advertising company) that pioneered the self-cleaning public toilet model that has emerged worldwide. The company has even **won contracts** to supply entire metropolitan networks of public toilets financed by its advertising. However, it is worth noting that these deals and the toilets they have delivered have in some cases given rise to a **new suite of issues and controversy**. Rather than wholesale privatisation, authorities may choose to rent advertising space in and outside of public toilets, as is commonly done on public transport, using the revenue to fund operations and maintenance.

User-pays systems represent another form of compromise, in which authorities charge a nominal fee (typically less than \$1) for use of a public toilet. In return, users are guaranteed a high level of cleanliness and hygiene, and may even encounter an attendant. As a use-charge may bar access for some, a user-pays system is not a solution for all toilets in a community and is most appropriate at sites with multiple facilities (with the user-pays toilet the premium option), or sites that cater to tourists.

Advocacy is another key component of successful provision. Other land management authorities and service providers deliver buildings and spaces that offer opportunities for contributions to the public network (e.g. state and national

parks, train stations and bus terminals), and local governments should advocate to regional and state transport authorities to ensure that these opportunities are leveraged to provide toilets where they are needed. Internal advocacy and community advocacy may also be required to communicate the importance and potential benefits of a public toilet strategy and delivery of a high-quality, accessible, and inclusive network.

Comment

Considering their importance to the wellbeing and vitality of community members, ubiquity, and capacity to improve social, environmental, and economic outcomes alike, public toilets deserve dedicated strategy – but only a handful of local authorities currently have one (such as [Greater Shepparton](#), [City of Hobart](#), and [Flintshire County](#)).

The preparation of a strategy for a municipal public toilet network would provide the mechanism to explore opportunities to improve the process of planning for new facilities, the standard of existing toilets, and the efficiency of distribution. Without a strategic approach, their provision and management is undertaken in an ad-hoc fashion that responds to acute gaps and maintenance requests, typically ignoring patterns of issues or opportunities for consolidation and improved access. This type of investment approach is less likely to align with community needs and best interests in the long-term, and results in poor cost-effectiveness – in other words, money down the drain. The preparation of a public toilet strategy also offers the opportunity to explore ways of overcoming barriers to effective provision – of which funding is likely the most common.

For more information on this briefing contact LGIU Australia by emailing mzierke@sgsep.com.au.