

NSW Legislative Council
Portfolio Committee No. 8 – Customer Service

Inquiry into public toilets

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry.

National Seniors Australia (NSA) is the leading advocacy organisation for older Australians. Through our research and advocacy activities, NSA works to improve the wellbeing of all older Australians.

Our submission focuses on the provision of accessible and ambulant toilets to seniors. It is critical that toilet facilities are available and accessible for seniors in ways that cater for the needs of this cohort. Access to public toilet facilities improves the wellbeing of older people who might otherwise avoid public areas, such as parks. Parks and other recreation areas provide important infrastructure for physical activity that supports healthy ageing. Boosting the availability of accessible toilets for seniors will ensure that older people feel comfortable getting out and about in our community.

NSA wishes to make four recommendations:

1. As an interim measure, allocate resources to improve the data quality of the National Public Toilet Map and promoting its use. This includes both inclusion of toilets on the Map, but also the level of information about toilets, such as photos to allow people to determine the suitability of facilities.
2. Improve the availability of accessible and ambulant toilets, taking into account areas with limited facilities and based on need.
3. Incorporate dementia-friendly design principles in public toilets.
4. Work with other governments of all levels to improve availability of accessible and ambulant public toilets.

The benefits of public toilets

According to the most recent available ABS data, almost 17% of the NSW population live with a disability¹. This likely represents an under-count for the need for accessible and ambulant toilets; as one example, the Continence Foundation of Australia estimates one-in-four Australians are incontinent². Additionally, an ageing population will likely need higher levels of access to accessible and ambulant toilets.

¹ [Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2018 – Australian Bureau of Statistics](#)

² [Key statistics on incontinence – Continence Foundation of Australia](#)

As the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) found in the United Kingdom, lack of public toilets disproportionately impacts particular groups, including older people, women, and those with a disability³.

The issue is not only the availability of toilets, but the knowledge of their availability. The RSPH found that 20% of people may be deterred from leaving their home due to a lack of knowledge of available toilets, which they described as a “loo leash”. Forty-three percent (43%) were deterred from leaving their home if they had a medical condition which increased their need for toilet facilities. Fifty-six percent (56%) of people restricted their fluid intake due to a lack of toilets, which can lead to urinary tract health issues. Limited access to toilets can have broader health impacts as well, for instance a lack of toilets in parks can restrict the public places people can use for exercise⁴.

It is therefore important that public toilets are available and known to be available, so that public spaces are available for seniors to use to counter social isolation and inactivity⁵.

Example of limited availability of public toilets in Australia

Comparing the National Public Toilet Map⁶ to ABS population data⁷, the general level of availability appears to follow population levels and transport corridors. However, we are concerned about areas where toilet facilities are unavailable.

For instance, the three suburbs of Marsden Park, Shanes Park, and Melonba in north-west Sydney appear to have limited accessible toilet facilities. According to the 2021 Census⁸, these three suburbs had a combined population of 16,433 people. Based on the most recent data available, which is from 2018 and limited to the Local Government Area, Blacktown, about 13.60% of the population in this area live with a disability⁹. This area is not solely residential, but includes several shopping precincts, supermarkets, restaurants, parks, and schools. Yet, according to the National Public Toilet Map, there is only one accessible toilet in the area.

If someone was at the pharmacy or supermarket at 101 Elara Boulevard, Marsden Park, the nearest accessible toilet according to the map is 4 km away by a practical route. From the data available, we are unable to determine if the issue is actual availability or limited information. But from the perspective of a person needing an accessible toilet, this difference is irrelevant to their need.

³ [Taking the P***: the decline of the great British public toilet – RSPH](#)

⁴ [Exploring Accessibility and Inclusion in Public Toilets – The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust](#)

⁵ [The Provision of Toilets in Wales: Local Toilets Strategies - Welsh Government](#)

⁶ [The National Public Toilet Map](#)

⁷ [Census mesh block counts, 2021 – Australian Bureau of Statistics](#)

⁸ [2021 Marsden Park, Census All persons QuickStats – Australian Bureau of Statistics](#)

⁹ [Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2018 – Australian Bureau of Statistics](#)

Improvements to public toilets

The above is not intended to criticise the National Toilet Map, but to make the point that people need both accessible and ambulant toilet facilities to be available and to know they exist, where they are, and when they are available. This motivates our above recommendation to improve data in the National Toilet Map, which will benefit both the community and provide information to inform an expansion of public toilets in underserved areas.

Sufficient signage directing people towards toilets is an important factor in people locating and using public toilets¹⁰. This signage should include the distance, facilities, and opening hours, as this serves to reduce digital exclusion from this information.

In addition to the above benefits to having available accessible toilets, there are wider community benefits to having reliable, maintained, and hygienic public toilets. Several features that do not require substantial changes to buildings include:

- Providing sanitary bins, sometimes referred to as male incontinence bins in men's toilets.
- Automatic toilet seats.
- Disposable toilet seat covers.
- Cleaning sprays and wipes.

Though consideration should also be given to upgrades, such as automatic cleaning, drawing on overseas examples of design best practice¹¹.

Public toilets and dementia-friendly design

A concern among our members is that public toilets, and toilets in commercial premises for the use of the public, do not adequately incorporate design elements that are of benefit to those experiencing cognitive decline.

With an ageing population, more people with cognitive decline and dementia will be living in the community¹². The design of public toilets should consider their accessibility needs both physical and mental.

¹⁰ [Exploring Accessibility and Inclusion in Public Toilets – The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust](#)

¹¹ [Exploring Accessibility and Inclusion in Public Toilets – The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust](#)

¹² [Dementia in Australia – AIHW](#)

Some of these design elements can be incorporated widely, taking example from aged care design, such as: ^{13, 14}

- Brighter light while using matte finishes to reduce glare and shadows.
- Contrasting colours (including for doors, toilet seats, grab rails).
- Simple layouts.
- Clear signage.
- Non-slip floors.

As discussed above, signage is needed to allow people to find their way to toilets. These signs, and signs inside toilets, are also an important part of dementia-friendly design. Such signs should be clear, use contrasting colours, use both words and symbols, and the surrounding space should not be cluttered with other information.

Some other design elements may require dedicated toilets, such as use of familiar fittings and fixtures (including handles, locks, buttons, and taps).

Fundamentally, this is about making cost-effective changes so toilets are as easy to use as possible. As Alzheimer's Disease International noted "good design did not have to cost the earth and simple principles could be applied in any context"¹⁵.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. We welcome opportunities to contribute to this in the future.

Yours Sincerely



Chris Grice
Chief Executive Officer

¹³ [Final report on the development of the draft National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines](#)

¹⁴ [Designing dementia-friendly care environments – Dementia Australia](#)

¹⁵ [World Alzheimer Report 2020, Design Dignity Dementia: dementia-related design and the built environment, Volume 1 – Alzheimer's Disease International](#)