

## Discussion: Public toilets—the need for compulsory provision

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In March 1985 I founded 'All Mod Cons', a group which campaigned for the provision of more toilets for use by members of the public and which led to the creation of the British Toilet Association (BTA) in 1999. I was proud to receive the BTA 2004 Special Award for my contribution to the campaign 'to raise standards of washroom hygiene and provision over many years'. It was very pleasing to read the paper by Dr Clara Greed regarding the need for compulsory provision, and I agree absolutely with her very detailed study—with one vitally important exception. In subsection 4.1 'Levels of provision', the recommendations of BTA members are misquoted. Unfortunately, if the levels of provision printed were followed, this would have the effect of perpetuating the inequality of provision for women and men. To avoid all confusion, I would like to state clearly the levels of provision recommended by the BTA. We recommend that a local authority should provide no fewer than:

- one cubicle per 550 women and female children known to be dwelling in its area;
- one cubicle *or* one urinal per 1100 men and male children (please note that the provision for men may be made *either* by a lavatory bowl within a cubicle *or* an individual urinal *or* not less than 700 mm of space at a trough urinal);
- one unisex cubicle for the use of people with disabilities per 10 000 people in its area;
- one unisex nappy-changing facility per 10 000 people in its area.

These recommendations were used in a Private Members' Bill published by Jon Owen Jones MP in 1994 and gained support from members of both sides of the House. Unfortunately the Government of the time did not support it so the Bill did not become law.

The BTA recommendations are the result of a great deal of research and consultation, over many years. In late 1993/early 1994 a survey was conducted into local authority provision, in order to compare existing provision with the recommended provision. The survey results showed that 70% of local authorities met our target provision for men but a mere 25% met the target for women. (Interestingly, 45% met our target for people with disabilities but only 4% provided the recommended number of nappy-changing facilities.)

Since that survey was carried out many local authorities have reduced the number of facilities they provide for residents and tourists. This has a deleterious effect on the health, dignity and lifestyle of millions of people, directly or indirectly. It is the 21st century and we all deserve readily accessible, clean, well-maintained public toilets as one of our basic human rights.

**Author's reply**

Certainly there should be far higher standards as recommended by Susan Cunningham who has campaigned for nearly 20 years on this topic. Indeed double the provision for women as for men should be the objective. Perhaps I am more pragmatic in that at present it is so difficult to get even parity in terms of 1 : 1 all female provision, and existing public toilet provision is often on the 2 : 1 basis in favour of men because they have the urinals as well as the cubicles. I should have made it clearer which were my figures and which were Susan's, although I thought I had made it clear that Susan had always stressed a higher level of provision.

Although my recommendations were lower than Susan's in respect of toilet cubicle provision, they were higher in relation to distribution and frequency of toilet provision across the city as a whole. My suggested levels of city-wide toilet provision were certainly not profligate compared with the Far East and standards set by the World Toilet Organisation in countries more progressive than the UK. In November I attended the World Toilet Summit in Beijing. The Chinese have an enormous programme of public toilet building, and they have put public toilet blocks every 300 metres along the main central streets (about every quarter of a mile). Their toilets come in different grades from 1\* to 5\* with the best ones for western tourists and the reasonable 1\* and 2\* ones for the local people, many of whom do not have toilets in their own homes. There are over 100 000 toilet blocks in Beijing, a city of 13 million people and 2 million foreign visitors each year. I visited both the posh toilets for the westerners and the more basic ones for the locals, and can truly say that a restroom revolution is underway. While there is no doubt China is concerned about its international image and with providing toilets for the forthcoming Olympic Games in 2008, but nevertheless there seemed to be a plethora of toilets even in areas where the local housing areas have now got indoor plumbing.<sup>30</sup> All the toilets have attendants in them, which makes all the difference in terms of upkeep and discouraging anti-social behaviour. Many of the toilets had small souvenir shops,

newspaper kiosks and photographic sundries or little local stores associated with them to meet both tourist and local needs.

Similar toilet revolutions have been undertaken in South Korea and Taiwan. Japan is the originator of the restroom revolution under the leadership of the Japan Toilet Association. Public toilets are seen as a component of a civilised society, as a sign of modernity, rather like computers are viewed in the West.

In partnership with Prof. Julienne Hanson at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College, London, and Jo-Anne Bichard, our Research Fellow, we are undertaking research on the role of public toilets in creating accessible city centres, as a component of the wider Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)-funded Vivacity Project. Building on this, research exchange visits are taking place between Japan and the UK as part of a further EPSRC-funded study of comparisons between public attitudes towards changes in technology in the two countries. We have just hosted Japanese colleagues who visited both local authorities and manufacturers in the UK, and this is to be followed up by visits to Japan in the near future. The next great toilet event is the World Toilet Expo in Shanghai, as well as the World Plumbing Conference in Auckland, New Zealand. Such conferences always take into account the environmental aspects of toilet construction and the need to conserve water, as well as human needs. Of course with the recent tsunami disaster Far East toilet colleagues are actively involved in helping with the crisis, making sure that emergency toilet provision meets Eastern requirements rather than often inappropriate Western agency standards.

I have always recommended the establishment of a logical hierarchy of toilet provision; I have sought to give an indication of the factors and considerations that should be taken into account in the provision of public toilets, not only on levels of provision, but location and distribution. I have suggested a high level of distribution as a basis for getting providers to think and to negotiate on what is feasible. However, it is up to the professional discretion and expertise of the policy makers and managers who determine toilet provision at local authority level to take the recommendations forward. This is not a purely quantitative matter, as qualitative attitudes need to be taken into account too, not least the undervaluing of provision for women. I note that the House of Lords, EU Committee on

Social and Consumer Affairs 16·6·04 had a debate on the equal gender access to goods and services, and this is surely one of the most gender-unequal aspects of urban governance. In parallel, a new EU Gender Directive came into being at the start of 2005, which relates to equal treatment for men and women in respect of provision of goods and services. It is anticipated that, in due course, this will lead to a reappraisal of existing ratios of public toilet provision in the UK and within other European countries.

Therefore it is envisaged as a result of EU requirements on the mainstreaming of gender considerations into all aspects of local government decision making, resource allocation and employment practice, that the issue of women's toilets will gain greater credibility and attention in the future. Meanwhile I am saddened to see that male public street urinals are springing up all over city centres, such as in Bristol, with no commensurate provision for women, who already have very limited provision. Increased accessibility requirements to all public buildings came into force in October 2004, under the terms of the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act. As a result, some local authorities are closing their ordinary public toilets, rather than going to the effort of making reasonable adjustments in terms of access, thus disadvantaging everyone. At the same time the government keeps telling us we must plan for accessible, sustainable, socially inclusive cities but it seems to have a blind spot when it comes to toilet provision. As for myself, I continue to campaign for better toilets and recommend that concerned readers join the British Toilet Association and lobby their MPs. With mass tourism nowadays, this has become a global issue, for 'a nation is judged by its toilets'. To find out more about the public toilet situation in the UK, visit <http://www.saveourloos.org>, the website for the Public Toilets Alliance, which is comprised of the BTA, the Centre for Accessible Environments and five medical charities.

## REFERENCES

30. BROUDEHOUS A. *The Making and Selling of Post-Mao Beijing*. Routledge, New York, 2004.
31. HANSON J. and GREED C. Accessible public toilets in city centres: the next instalment. *Access by Design*, 2004, No. 101, 28–32.

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