



Access to toilets post C19 – designing out disability

No Where To Go Team

<https://www.accessiblespaces.co.uk/>

Derek Bell, Mary Hull, Libby Morrison and Janice McLaughlin, Newcastle University

As Covid-19 moves from the trauma and immense challenge of the pandemic at its peak, to an uncertain future of living with the virus, local and national government and communities are beginning to re-design public spaces to limit the risks of infection and secure social distancing. One ‘obvious’ way to do this is not to re-open public toilets. However, as with other responses to Covid-19, this ‘obvious’ approach will bring significant problems for disabled people and carers who rely on being able to use accessible public toilets in order to participate in society. If this issue is not factored into design, disabled people and carers will be – yet again - designed out of society.

Who Needs Toilets?

Before Covid-19 the UK did not have sufficient publicly accessible toilets to meet the needs of its population. Austerity measures over the last ten years have seen a significant reduction in the provision of [local authority funded toilets](#); this is because there is no statutory requirement on local authorities to provide them. While, everyone needs to be able to use toilets, some people need toilets more and need toilets which are more accessible and designed with their different needs in mind. This includes [14 million people](#) who have some form of impairment - 1.2 million of whom are wheelchair users, 700,000 who are autistic and 2 million with a visual impairment. In addition, crucially,

there are also 14 million people who have urinary incontinence and 6.5 million who experience bowel incontinence – 130,000 of whom have a stoma. Older people are more likely to have health needs or to experience incontinence, and additionally are more likely to care for someone else – often with dementia, in fact almost a million. As we emerge from Covid-19 lockdown, these same people are at risk of having their self-isolation extended due to the lack of adequate toilet provision in public space.

Commercial Provision and Community Toilet Schemes

As local authorities reduced their provision, people have come to rely more and more on the provision of toilets in commercial spaces – shops, cafes, cinemas. In Newcastle for example there are no publicly funded toilets. In this context, local authorities have encouraged commercial spaces, via [Community Toilet](#) or Use our Loos schemes, to open their toilets for general use and for this to become the primary solution to public toilet provision. However, it is the same commercial venues that we have come to rely on, which are the businesses most affected by COVID-19 and the restrictions in movement that have come with it. Even as these spaces re-open, it is likely that due to costs and risks of infection that they will not open their toilets, or will restrict their availability. As the '[Death of the High Street](#)' becomes a reality, what is clear is that leaving it to the commercial sector to be the provider of public toilets is not tenable in the Covid-19 era. Now, more than ever, there is a need and a moral imperative for state or partnership funded, accessible provision and for strategies (such as the Welsh Government's [Local Toilets Strategy](#)) to become a legal requirement as part of the redesign of public space now occurring across the UK. This is not only a moral argument but an economic one too – people's ability to work can be dependent on toilet provision, as well as their opportunity to spend money. The grey and purple pound is important to the local economy.

Social Distancing Model – concerns for physical and mental well being

In some ways the post lockdown world will look remarkably similar to the pre lockdown one for disabled people and carers. New social distancing measures appear designed to work for those who are young, able bodied and have no caring responsibilities. The stigma and discrimination routinely experienced by disabled people may be exacerbated by complex new rules governing how we all behave in public places. How easy will it be for those with a visual impairment, mobility problems, learning disabilities or other cognitive

difficulties to [negotiate one way systems](#), a higher volume of street furniture, two metre rules, or additional and onerous queueing – including prolonged periods of standing? How sympathetic will other people be? During lockdown we became very familiar with park benches either being removed or covered in tape in order to discourage people stopping to sit down. These barriers alone are enough to ensure many more people stay at home, remaining isolated from their communities. But add in the catastrophic reduction in availability of toilets and most disabled people and carers will be unable to access public spaces even as we come out of lockdown. If most council run public toilets remain closed, continuing closure of the hospitality/service sector means most people with additional needs and/or caring responsibilities will be unable to benefit from a partial loosening of social distance guidelines.

As lockdown has progressed it has become even clearer that isolation is not good for people's physical or mental health. This lends more strength to the long-held argument that people of all abilities should be able to get out and about to access public spaces. For this to happen, appropriate toilets are essential.

Designing out disability

We are concerned that [toilet design and provision](#) will inevitably focus solely on cleanliness and social distancing, at the expense of accessibility. We are in danger of “designing out” disability and creating a world where large sections of society are just not seen in public – this has huge implications not only for disabled people, but also for carers.

So what is needed? It may seem obvious, but yet it feels like it does need saying - what we need are more toilets of all kinds – not less. This can be reconciled with the management of social distancing in public space. Covid 19 has resulted in govt/public health advice to hand wash properly and often using hot water and soap. Providing good, clean accessible and appropriate toilet facilities can ensure that the public have more opportunities to handwash thoroughly when in public spaces. It will also guard against the increasing trend of [people having to relieve themselves outside](#), particularly when they need to queue for basic necessities. To ensure the increased provision of public toilets we need local authorities to have a statutory duty to ensure adequate toilet provision for all. [Re-design of toilets will be needed to reduce infection](#), but this process must include consideration of the disability implications. The best way to do that is to [involve disabled people](#) and their

organisations in re-design processes. If we can build an entire hospital in 2 weeks, surely we can provide thoughtful, appropriate toilets in the near future.