



# **Nowhere to go: improving the accessibility of public toilets**

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## **Introduction**

'Nowhere to Go' is a collaborative project between researchers from across the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at Newcastle University and Carers Northumberland. We are examining the difficulties disabled people and their carers experience accessing appropriate accessible toilets in the region. An important focus, drawing from the expertise of disabled people, their carers' and organisations that support them, is to identify practical areas where improvements can be made.

## **Why is this research needed?**

The UN asserts that access to clean, usable, appropriate and safe toilet facilities is an important human right.<sup>ii</sup> Being able to use good quality, clean, accessible toilets when and where we need them, not only improves local facilities but maintains people's health and well-being. Some people, particularly those who are older or who have certain illnesses or impairments, can suffer discomfort and distress if they struggle to find suitable toilets – and this can stop them from going out. Enjoying everyday activities like shopping or eating out helps to keep us connected to our local communities, and prevents loneliness and isolation. Many disabilities are 'hidden'. Raising awareness of the different needs people might have can help improve planning and design of public spaces including toilet provision.

## **Local Research Context**

Northumberland has an increasingly ageing population. By 2035, 30% of its population is forecast to be over 65.<sup>iii</sup> 9% of people in Northumberland have a

disability that limits their daily activities significantly.<sup>iv</sup> Carers of disabled people also experience barriers and limitations to social inclusion. Carers Northumberland estimates currently there are 35,500 carers in the county. It is also a rural region, which brings challenges such as access to services and high levels of social isolation. Tourism is central to the local economy. Northumberland County Council, like other local authorities, has experienced a decade of difficult and challenging financial conditions.

## **Wider UK Context**

Almost 14 million people in the UK have some form of disability<sup>v</sup>, only approximately 1.2 million of whom are wheelchair users.<sup>vi</sup> This means that while accessibility is often associated with wheelchair use, this does not encapsulate the range of needs and people, accessible design should consider. For example, in 2014 there were 700,000 people caring for a person with dementia at home. It is estimated that this will increase to 1.3 million by 2025.<sup>vii</sup> Over 700,000 people in the UK are autistic, which means that 2.8m people have a close relative on the autism spectrum.<sup>viii</sup> More than two million people in the UK are born with sight problems or develop sight loss that is severe enough to have a significant impact on their daily lives.<sup>ix</sup> 14 million people in the UK experience urinary incontinence and 6.5 million experience bowel incontinence.<sup>x</sup> For all these different people being able to easily use an appropriate toilet in public spaces is fundamental to their opportunities for social participation. However, many local councils have closed public toilets over the last two decades. Research by the BBC estimated that local councils had stopped maintaining 673 public toilets between 2010 and 2018.<sup>xi</sup> There is no statutory requirement for local authorities to provide public toilet facilities.

## **Our Research - the Nowhere to Go Project**

The work began as a UG Politics project in a Community Placement Module with Carers Northumberland in 2015. One of the key findings from a series of focus groups conducted with informal carers, was that a lack of appropriate accessible toilets limited the places they visited and their participation in social activities.

In 2017, with Carers Northumberland, the Nowhere to Go project obtained funding from the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account Co-Production fund (plus the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology) to explore the issue further with disabled people and their carers. We wanted to find out:

- What are their experiences of accessing toilet provision in Northumberland?
- What makes a good accessible toilet?
- What are the problems and barriers they have encountered?
- What could businesses and town and parish councils do to improve toilet provision?

Over the last eighteen months we have worked with a wide range of individuals and organisations to explore these questions. Via interviews, focus groups and workshops we have engaged with:

- Disability organisations - including Adapt Tynedale, Blind Ambition, Newcastle, Central User Forum, Blyth, BID Services, Morpeth, Berwick Ostomy Group, Age UK, Ashington, Alzheimer's Society, Ashington
- Carers organisations - including Carers Northumberland, Carers Trust and In It Together
- Disabled people and carers
- Town and parish councillors and other stakeholders.

More recently we have been working closely with Northumberland County Council, sharing our findings with them and informing their evolving strategies to respond to the needs of the region.

### **Key Findings**

- Disabled people and carers in Northumberland limit the places they go to and their participation in local activities due to a lack of suitable toilets. This is a major health and well-being issue and reduces their opportunities to be full participants in society. Making it difficult or even impossible for people to leave their homes and participate in social life fundamentally reduces their rights as citizens.
- In Northumberland there are major limitations in the availability of toilets and even more problems in the provision of accessible toilets. This creates serious problems for people who need to go urgently, for example those with a stoma or Crohn's disease. If people are not sure if they will be able to find and use an appropriate toilet then they stay at home.

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*It would make me more confident if there were more toilets available.*

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- Social attitudes create barriers to people being able to use the toilets that are appropriate to their needs. In particular, there is a lack of awareness of 'hidden' disabilities, such as bowel and continence problems, dementia or autism. People highlighted occasions where they received public abuse for using accessible toilets when others didn't recognise they had a right to use them.

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*It gets tiring explaining to people why I need to use the accessible toilet, even though I don't use a wheelchair. We would love a 'no need to explain' campaign.*

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- There is also considerable stigma associated with incontinence and disability. Talking about toilets and toilet needs can still be uncomfortable for many; this creates problems when it restricts people's opportunities to ask about toilets or gain the information that they need.

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*There's too much stigma, we need to educate people.*

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- Accessibility is about much more than wheelchair access. There are a variety of ways that toilets can be made more accessible to people with a range of different needs. For example, poor signage and lighting in many facilities make it difficult for people who are visually impaired, have dementia or a learning difficulty. Signs are often too small and unclear. It is important a more inclusive approach to accessibility is developed. This does not need to be expensive. Practical things like colour contrasts between walls, door and light switches make a difference.
- Cleanliness is very important to people, but can be more of a challenge for people with different needs. For example, people with a visual impairment described their discomfort being able to smell, but unable to see a toilet. Many people with a stoma need to kneel on the floor to empty their stoma bag. Wet, dirty floors cause considerable distress.
- More Changing Places toilets<sup>xii</sup> are needed, particularly in the north of the county. Being able to use a Changing Places toilet can be life changing for people with complex needs and their carers. Without the hoists and changing beds available in these fully accessible toilets, many parents and carers are forced to change adults and older children on the floor.

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*I've had to change my son on a dirty toilet floor with his head next to the loo, where's the dignity in that?*

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- There is a lack of easily accessible and reliable information about the accessibility and availability of toilet provision across the region. Due to the lack and variability of information, people only go to places where they feel confident about the facilities available to them.
- The region does have a community toilet scheme where organisations, such as cafes and shops, make their toilets available to people without them having to purchase anything or pay to use the facilities. However, people are unaware of the scheme, although many think the idea is a good one. If more organisations sign up to the scheme and look at making some practical changes to ensuring their facilities are more accessible, this could be transformative.

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*I haven't heard of a community toilet scheme, but it sounds like a good idea. Somewhere to ring up about where toilets are would be great if I was planning a trip.*

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## **Recommendations**

Our recommendations are aimed at three different audiences: (1) toilet providers; (2) local authorities; (3) national government.

### **1. Recommendations for public and customer toilet providers, including local authorities, supermarkets, leisure centres, shops and cafes**

- Easy, low-cost improvements to existing toilet facilities can make them more accessible for disabled people and their carers.
- Things that make a difference include: providing large, clear signs into and out of toilets; keeping toilets clean and tidy; ensuring that simple fixtures and fittings (e.g., a shelf and hooks) are provided; checking that grab rails and other accessibility aids are fitted correctly; providing good lighting and using contrasting colours; and installing easy to use washing and drying equipment.

- Putting information about toilets on a shop or cafe website, including information on the size of the toilet, its facilities and photographs, makes it much easier for people to know whether they would be able to use the facilities. It also makes people feel that they are welcome and confident they can contact the business to ask further questions.
- Raising awareness of ‘hidden’ disabilities through staff training can help to ensure that people feel comfortable and are treated with dignity when they need to access toilets in unfamiliar places.
- Joining the national ‘Use our Loos’ scheme, or a local community toilets scheme, can increase the number of toilets available locally. For those people who need to use the toilet more often, or more urgently, knowing they can use a toilet without having to ask, reduces anxiety.
- In new buildings and refurbishments, new toilets can be designed to go beyond the requirements of British Standards and building regulations so that they meet the needs of as many people as possible. It may also be possible to install a Changing Places toilet.

## **2. Recommendations for local authorities**

- Working with partners in the public, voluntary and commercial sectors, local authorities should develop local toilets strategies that will support improved access to toilets in their areas.
- Reviewing the condition of existing local authority facilities and gathering information about other public and customer toilets in an area provides a useful benchmark for future decision-making.
- Agreeing on simple strategic goals and on how to assess progress over time can promote stakeholder confidence and make it easier to deliver the strategy. Key goals might include: improving the quality of existing toilets; filling ‘gaps’ where there is limited or no access to appropriate toilets; and raising awareness of the importance of accessible toilets.
- Setting up a successful community toilets scheme and/or working with the national ‘Use our Loos’ scheme can enhance provision in an area. The best community toilets schemes require some investment so that local authorities can provide advice and support for scheme members.
- Providing detailed information on local toilets on a dedicated, easy to find and frequently updated web page can help both locals and visitors.
- Linking a local toilets strategy to other local strategies, including local development planning and health and social care, can help to ensure that public and private investment in an area improves toilet provision in the medium and long-term. This might include, for example, requiring Changing Places toilets in large new buildings.

## **3. Recommendations for national government**

- A national online map that shows public and community toilets, which is kept up to date and provides detailed information, would make it much easier for people

with disabilities to plan trips anywhere in the country. This would require substantial investment to ensure the level of accuracy and detail that is needed for people to be able to use it confidently.

- Requiring all local authorities to develop local toilets strategies (as the Welsh Government has done and as a House of Commons' Committee recommended in 2008) would help to improve toilet provision across the country as well as promoting the collection and pooling of information.
- Increasing the number of Changing Places toilets, for example, by providing funding and requiring large new buildings to include them, would help to remove a significant barrier to social inclusion for more than 250,000 people and their carers.

### **Resources produced by the project**

Our website: <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/nowheretogo> includes a range of resources we have produced with our partners to support change. This includes a Best Practice Guide to accessible toilet provision in Northumberland and a short film centred on the knowledge and expertise of disabled people and carers.

### **Next Steps**

- We are working with Northumberland County Council to explore the development and implementation of a local community toilet strategy.
- We have had initial discussions with Newcastle City Council about the applicability of our work to their initiative to make the city Dementia Friendly.
- We are connecting up with other organisations and researchers working on accessibility design and planning issues. We have a workshop later this month to bring these groups together to look at next stages in developing a more sustained and national programme of work.
- We are looking at more sustainable funding pathways to grow the project activity whilst retaining the co-production ethos.
- The 'Best Practice Guide to Accessible Toilet Design,' is currently being redesigned for national dissemination.

### **Useful Online Information**

Carers Northumberland

<https://www.carersnorthumberland.org.uk>

Euan's Guide

[www.euansguide.com](http://www.euansguide.com)

You're Welcome Community Toilet Scheme Northumberland

[www.northumberland.gov.uk/ParksandGardens.aspx#useourloo](http://www.northumberland.gov.uk/ParksandGardens.aspx#useourloo)

Golden Guide

[www.goldenguide.org.uk](http://www.goldenguide.org.uk)

British Toilet Association

[www.btaloos.co.uk](http://www.btaloos.co.uk)

Changing Places

[www.changing-places.org/find\\_a\\_toilet.aspx](http://www.changing-places.org/find_a_toilet.aspx)

Great British Toilet Map

[www.toiletmap.org.uk](http://www.toiletmap.org.uk)

The World of Accessible Toilets

[www.accessible-toilet-project.blog](http://www.accessible-toilet-project.blog)

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<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22400&LangID=E>

<sup>iii</sup> Northumberland County Council (2013) Past Trends and Future Change.

<https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/NorthumberlandCountyCouncil/media/Northumberland-Knowledge/NK%20people/Demographics/Past-trends-and-future-change.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Office of National Statistics (2015) Nearly one in five people had some form of disability in England and Wales.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/nearlyoneinfivepeoplehadsomeformofdisabilityinenglandandwales/2015-07-13>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.scope.org.uk/media/disability-facts-figures>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wheelchair-services/>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-us/policy-and-influencing/dementia-uk-report>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/myths-facts-stats.aspx>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.rnib.org.uk/professionals/knowledge-and-research-hub/key-information-and-statistics>

<sup>x</sup> <http://www.colostomyuk.org/information/what-is-a-stoma/>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-45009337>

<sup>xii</sup> <http://www.changing-places.org>