

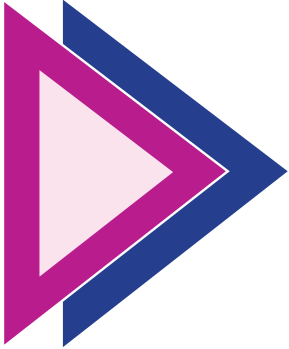
HOW TO **IMPROVE** THE ACCESSIBILITY OF PUBLIC AND CUSTOMER TOILETS

EASY, LOW COST
WAYS TO MAKE A
BIG DIFFERENCE TO
PEOPLE'S LIVES



NOT EVERY DISABILITY IS **VISIBLE**.

WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?



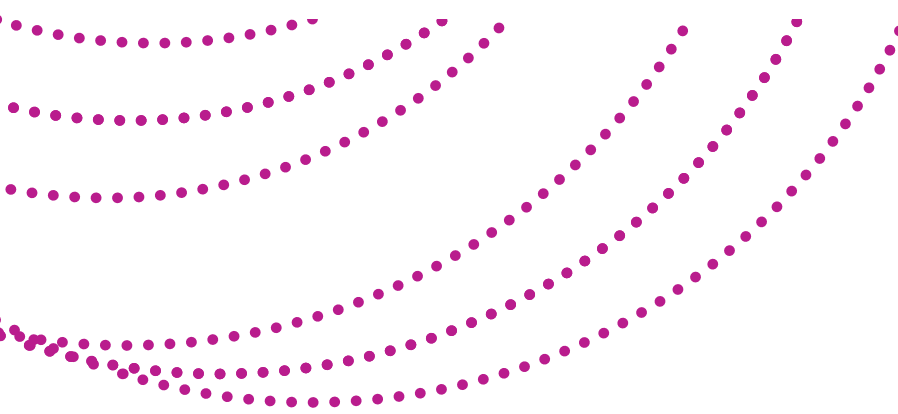
This guide is for anyone who provides toilets for public or customer use. In it you will find advice on how to make your toilets more accessible for people with disabilities and their carers. It can also be used by individuals who want to raise awareness and suggest improvements locally. The guide has been produced by drawing on the experiences of people with disabilities and their carers.



WHY IS ACCESS TO TOILETS IMPORTANT?

“If there’s one thing you’ve got to do in life, it’s go to the loo, right!?”

The UN asserts that access to clean, usable, appropriate and safe toilet facilities is an important human right.¹ You might assume that this right is fully provided for in the UK, but in reality, a lack of appropriate toilet facilities stops many people, especially those who are older or have specific illnesses or disabilities, from leaving their homes. Many others are forced to limit themselves to places where they know they can access appropriate toilets.



More high quality accessible toilets would make a big difference to the lives of millions of people in the UK.

Being confident that you can find a suitable toilet when and where you need one means you can enjoy everyday activities in your local community as well as exploring new places. In this guide, we suggest easy, low-cost actions that can make toilets that are already available for customer or public use more accessible. People with disabilities and their carers have told us about the small changes to toilets that can make a big difference to them.

Number of public toilets

Research by the BBC estimated that local councils had **stopped maintaining 673 public toilets** between 2010 and 2018.² This makes access to toilets in spaces such as leisure centres, cafes, shops and cultural venues more important for people with disabilities. The existing Building Regulations do not cover all the things that can help make a toilet accessible to different people with varied needs.



Access to work

3.3. million disabled people are economically inactive.³ Many are unable to work because of access problems, including a lack of appropriate toilet facilities.



The Purple Pound

In 2017, the government estimated that UK retailers were losing **£249 billion** a year because people with disabilities could not access their shops and services.⁴ People with disabilities prefer retailers with high quality accessible facilities, including toilets.



NOT EVERY DISABILITY IS VISIBLE

Almost 14 million people in the UK have some form of disability.⁵ Only approximately 1.2 million of those are **wheelchair users**,⁶ yet when we think of accessibility, we often think about the needs of wheelchair users – after all, the wheelchair is used as the symbol of accessible provision. There are many other disabilities, including “hidden disabilities”, which can make access to toilet facilities more difficult or more urgent. Some common disabilities that create varied toilet needs are:

Dementia

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 2025.⁷ People with dementia can become easily lost or disorientated on their way to or from the toilet, which may lead to significant distress for them and their carer.

Autism

Over 700,000 people in the UK are autistic, which means that 2.8m people have a close relative on the autism spectrum.⁸ Some people with autism can become upset by the noise of things like hand driers and find new places difficult to cope with on their own.

Visual Impairment

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.⁹ This can make it difficult to find and use toilets independently, especially if signs are small or unclear, toilets have poor lighting or facilities are cluttered.

Stoma

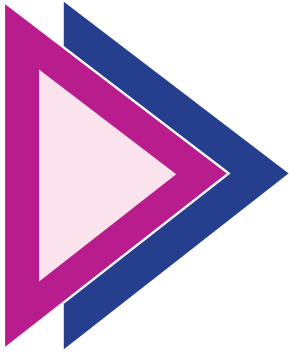
A stoma is an opening made surgically to the abdomen in order to divert the flow of faeces or urine. It is estimated that over 130,000 people in the UK are currently living with a stoma. Someone with a stoma may need to access a toilet urgently and needs facilities that can help them cleanly and safely empty the bag where their urine or faeces is collected.

Incontinence

14 million people in the UK experience urinary incontinence and 6.5 million experience bowel incontinence.¹⁰ There is still a stigma associated with incontinence and many people feel uncomfortable speaking about the issues they face. Ease of access and availability of toilets is vitally important to people experiencing incontinence.



WHAT CAN YOU DO TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO YOUR TOILETS?



There are many things that can be done to improve access to toilets for people with different disabilities. In this guide we suggest some simple, low cost things that can make a big difference for a lot of people. You may only be able to do some of these things, but little improvements across the country will have big effects on people's lives.

Signs

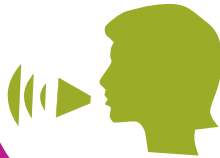
Clear signs are really important for people with visual impairments, dementia, learning difficulties, and autism.

Large, clear signs with good lighting can save people with dementia or visual impairments from getting lost on their way to or from the toilet, as well as reducing anxiety for them and anyone caring for them.

Signs with clear borders, good colour contrasts, and standard symbols can help people to find their way into and out of toilets.

Avoiding signs with non-standard images or words can save people from the embarrassment and the dangers of going into the wrong toilet.

Using a "Not every disability is visible" sign on accessible toilets can help to raise awareness, this helps stop people with hidden disabilities being questioned for their use of the toilets they need.



Leanne's story

Accessibility for people with learning difficulties

Leanne is a young woman with learning difficulties. She sometimes has a support worker with her, but likes to get out on her own. Leanne finds the lack of signs to toilets frustrating and sometimes very unclear. She has walked in to the men's toilet by mistake because a sign was not obvious. Leanne has also experienced negative comments when using an accessible toilet as people assume she does not have a disability. She thinks a "not every disability is visible sign" would make a big difference and reduce stigma. Leanne also believes passionately that we just need more toilets for public use – as she says "everyone needs the loo".

Clean and tidy

“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.”

Keeping toilets tidy and clean is good for everyone, but it is especially important for people with mobility issues, visual impairments or a stoma. Using an accessible toilet to store things like cleaning equipment can create major problems for wheelchair users and others with mobility problems or a visual impairment.

Providing bins in accessible toilets or cubicles is useful for disposal of stoma bags and incontinence pads, but it is important to ensure that they do not cause difficulties for wheelchair users or people with other mobility problems.

Cleanliness matters to everyone but people with a stoma run a significant risk of infection if they are forced to change their bag in a dirty toilet.

People with a visual impairment may not be able to see whether a toilet is clean or dirty, but they are often acutely aware of the smells they encounter. The worry of encountering something unpleasant that you cannot see can stop people from using toilets.



Janet's and Iain's stories

Accessibility for people with partial sight

Both Janet and Iain have experienced sight loss and are now partially sighted. They both found it affected their confidence in getting out and about. Using public toilets can be a real challenge in this bid for independence. Iain finds signs difficult to read – the larger and clearer the sign, the better. Lighting in the toilet can be an issue too and he always carries a torch with him – bright lighting on the way to and in the toilet can help. Both he and Janet find cleanliness is key too – Janet uses her sense of smell and always flushes before using a toilet to “be on the safe side”. Handwashing is vital for them both. So, a clean, well lit, well signposted toilet makes a real difference.



Bobbi's story

Accessibility for people with a stoma

Bobbi has a stoma and colostomy bag. She enjoys an active lifestyle and loves to play golf. Especially at the beginning, Bobbi didn't know when she would need a toilet and it often had to be found quickly – her partner would have to rush into shops or cafes and “plead” to use the toilet or they would try GP surgeries. She says an “urgent use card” can help with this, especially if staff on the premises are trained and know what it is. The things that make a real difference to Bobbi and her friends in the Stoma support group are a shelf in the cubicle to put changing equipment on, as well as a bin and hook on the back of the door and good ventilation for potentially pungent smells. Enough room for manoeuvre and a clean dry floor are vital too – some group members find kneeling down is the easiest way to empty their bag. Bobbi says small changes can make a big difference. The support group would love to see more education for the general public too so they are aware of hidden disabilities.

Simple fixtures and fittings

The most important thing for people with a stoma is a clean shelf near the toilet that they can use when they are changing their bag. If it is on a hinge it will not be an obstacle for others, such as wheelchair users or someone with a visual impairment. They also benefit from a bin to dispose of bags and pads, alongside good ventilation.

Hooks on the backs of doors are useful for many people and having them at an appropriate height for wheelchair users in accessible toilets is really important. It is very common for grab rails and other fittings in accessible toilets to be fitted incorrectly – for example, the wrong way up or at the wrong height – making it more difficult for wheelchair users to use the toilet.

Good lighting and the use of different colours and fittings

Poor lighting is a problem for many people but especially people with a visual impairment.

Automatic lighting controlled by a motion sensor can create problems for people with mobility problems or people who need to spend longer in a toilet.

Making sure that there are colour contrasts (e.g., different colour door and door frame or different colour toilet and toilet seat) can help people with dementia, visual impairments and learning difficulties to find their way around the toilet and avoid confusion.



Easy to use washing and drying equipment

Some taps and soap dispensers are difficult to operate for people with arthritis or other physical disabilities.

Taps and sinks can also be confusing, especially for people with dementia, learning difficulties or visual impairments.

Simple to operate taps and soap dispensers with clear instructions make it more likely that people will be able to wash their hands.

The noise of automatic hand driers can be very distressing for some people, especially with autism or learning difficulties. Choosing quieter options or having paper towels available can make it much easier for them and their carers to use toilets and wash and dry their hands properly.

Eileen and her son's story

Accessibility for people with autism

Eileen looks after her son who is 20 and has autism. He likes to be independent but going to the toilet when they are away from home can be difficult for them. Eileen can't go in with him, but feels he can be vulnerable on his own. Family cubicles would help with this. While he is okay with the loud sound of automated hand driers, others with autism can find them distressing, so having an alternative like paper towels makes a difference. He doesn't like using toilets with a wheelchair sign on the door, even if they offer more privacy, because he doesn't associate himself with this as he doesn't use a wheelchair. A "not every disability is visible" sign would help.

Friendly and helpful attitude

Good and accurate information

People with disabilities and their carers often plan their trips out around the information that they have about available public toilets. Many people will only go to places where they know that they can use a toilet.

Detailed information that they can trust gives people the confidence to go out.

Putting information about your toilets on your 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 your toilet. It also makes people feel that they are welcomed, and confident they can contact you to ask further questions.

You can also share information about your toilets using the [Great British Toilet Map](#) so that people looking for accessible facilities in a particular area can find your toilets.

It is really important that people with disabilities feel comfortable using toilets and asking for information about them.

Many people feel embarrassed asking about toilets because of how people respond to them.

Good signs and information can limit the need to ask questions.

Equally important, is that staff help people to feel comfortable to ask. Raising awareness through staff training can help to ensure that people are treated with dignity.

Training can make staff aware of "Just can't wait" or "Urgent use" cards, which are carried by people with bowel or bladder problems so that they can communicate their urgent need for a toilet more discreetly.


Training can also make sure that staff are able to answer phone enquiries about toilets, as well as actively helping people who might be struggling to find the toilets.

Even if you can't provide accessible toilets, you can make sure that you and your staff know where the nearest accessible toilet is so that you can help someone in need.

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TWENTY PRACTICAL
STEPS TO IMPROVING
ACCESSIBILITY

- 1 USE LARGE, CLEAR SIGNS TO DIRECT PEOPLE TO THE TOILET AND SIGNS INDICATING THE WAY INTO AND OUT OF THE TOILET.
- 2 USE SIGNS WITH CLEAR BORDERS, GOOD COLOUR CONTRASTS, AND STANDARD SYMBOLS.
- 3 AVOID SIGNS WITH NON-STANDARD IMAGES OR WORDS.
- 4 USE A "NOT EVERY DISABILITY IS VISIBLE" SIGN ON ACCESSIBLE TOILETS.
- 5 KEEP TOILETS CLUTTER FREE AND DON'T USE THEM TO STORE THINGS.
- 6 ENSURE TOILETS ARE KEPT CLEAN AND MONITORED REGULARLY.
- 7 PROVIDE BINS IN ACCESSIBLE TOILETS BUT ENSURE THAT THEY ARE NOT OBSTACLES FOR WHEELCHAIR USERS.
- 8 INSTALL A SHELF WITH ROUND EDGES IN AN ACCESSIBLE TOILET (A FOLDING ONE MINIMISES THE SPACE IT TAKES UP).
- 9 MAKE SURE THAT THERE ARE HOOKS ON DOORS, INCLUDING HOOKS AT AN APPROPRIATE HEIGHT FOR WHEELCHAIR USERS IN ACCESSIBLE TOILETS.
- 10 CHECK THAT GRAB RAILS AND OTHER FITTINGS IN ACCESSIBLE TOILETS ARE FITTED CORRECTLY.

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- 11 MAINTAIN OR IMPROVE LIGHTING AND AVOID AUTOMATIC LIGHTING ON A SHORT TIMER.
 - 12 USE COLOUR CONTRASTS TO MAKE IT EASIER TO IDENTIFY DOORS AND TOILET SEATS.
 - 13 MAKE SURE THAT TAPS AND SOAP DISPENSERS ARE SIMPLE TO OPERATE (AND PROVIDE CLEAR INSTRUCTIONS).
 - 14 PROVIDE AN ALTERNATIVE TO AUTOMATIC HAND DRYERS.
 - 15 PROVIDE AS MUCH INFORMATION AS POSSIBLE ABOUT YOUR TOILET ON YOUR WEBSITE.
 - 16 SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR TOILETS ON THE GREAT BRITISH TOILET MAP.
 - 17 PROVIDE STAFF TRAINING TO RAISE AWARENESS OF THE VARIED NEEDS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES.
 - 18 ENSURE STAFF CAN ANSWER QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR TOILETS AND OTHER NEARBY FACILITIES.
 - 19 MAKE SURE STAFF CAN RECOGNISE “JUST CAN’T WAIT” CARDS AND TREAT CUSTOMERS WITH SENSITIVITY.
 - 20 JOIN THE “USE OUR LOOS” SCHEME OR A LOCAL COMMUNITY TOILETS SCHEME.

WHAT ELSE NEEDS TO BE DONE?

As well as the small, low cost changes that can be made to your existing toilet facilities, there are some other things that will further improve access for people with disabilities in the longer term.

Community Toilet Schemes

If there are more publicly available toilets, more people will be able to get out and about in their communities.

The national “Use Our Loos” campaign aims to encourage local businesses to make their toilets accessible to the communities that they serve. Many local councils also operate their own community toilets schemes. Retailers as well as other commercial, public and community organisations agree to allow members of the public to use their toilet facilities without obligation to purchase products or services. Local councils provide information about who is participating in the scheme on their websites, through tourist information and in key locations, such as car parks and bus stations. Participants in the scheme are given signs to display to let people know that they can use their toilets.

Community toilet schemes can increase the number of toilets available locally. They can be especially helpful for visitors who can plan trips ahead, by checking a local council’s website before they go. For those people who need to use the toilet more often, or more urgently, knowing they can use a toilet without having to ask, can make a real difference, by reducing anxiety. More organisations being involved in community toilet schemes, alongside ensuring their facilities are more accessible and their staff ready to help people, will make it much more practically possible for more people to be a part of their local community.



Wendy and her husband’s story

Accessibility for people with Alzheimer’s

Wendy looks after her husband who has Alzheimer’s. This can make them both isolated as it’s difficult to get out. When planning trips Wendy likes to know where there are good public toilet facilities, but says finding this information is hard so they tend to stick to the same places. Wendy would find local information on where toilets are useful, particularly well-advertised and supported community toilet schemes. She doesn’t go into the toilet with her husband and once he got lost at a motorway service station as there were two ways out of the toilets. This was a scary experience and Wendy thinks good signage and family cubicles would make a real difference.

“People might buy something if you let them use your toilet.”



Changing Places toilets are essential for almost 250,000 people in the UK with multiple or profound physical or learning disabilities.

- People with multiple disabilities or those with spinal injuries, muscular dystrophy or multiple sclerosis often need extra equipment and space in order to be able to use a toilet safely and comfortably.
- Changing Places toilets are able to meet these needs by providing a height adjustable adult size changing bench, a hoist system and sufficient space for an electric wheelchair user and two carers.
- They therefore make a huge difference to people with a range of disabilities and their carers, helping them to access their communities.
- Unfortunately, across the UK the availability of these toilets is mixed.
- If Changing Places toilets were included as standard in large new buildings and major refurbishments, access for people with the most severe disabilities and their carers would rapidly improve.

Providing high quality, accessible toilets in new buildings and refurbishments

- It is really important to think about access to toilets when planning new buildings and doing major refurbishments on older buildings.
- Spacious toilets are easier to access for wheelchair users and people with mobility problems.
- New doors on toilets should be light so that they are easy to open.
- Accessible toilets with automatic sliding doors make access easier for independent wheelchair users.
- 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.
- The recommendations in the previous section can all be incorporated easily into new and refurbished toilets.



Eileen's story

In It Together, the need for Changing Places

Eileen is involved with In It Together – a Department of Education funded Parent Carer Forum for Northumberland. It represents parent carer views to the Local Authority and works in co-production with them to improve services for families with children/ young people with special educational needs and disabilities. Eileen is passionate about the need for more Changing Places toilets for people who care for either children or adults who cannot use standard or accessible toilets, but need specialist facilities including hoists. Eileen knows many people who have had to change their children on the floor of toilets and asks “where is the dignity in that?” Eileen suggests building more accessible toilets and in particular Changing Places toilets should be a legal requirement of new building projects and planned for and costed at the outset.

Local councils can make long-term improvements to access to toilets by developing a local toilet strategy in collaboration with commercial, voluntary and public sector partners.

In 2008, The House of Commons' Communities and Local Government Committee recommended that all local authorities should be required by Government to develop a strategy on the provision of public toilets in their area.

In 2018, the Welsh Government placed a duty on all local authorities in Wales to "prepare and publish a local toilets strategy for its area".

Working with partners in the public, voluntary and commercial sectors, local authorities have the power to develop local toilet strategies that will support improved access to toilets in their areas.

The financial constraints that have led to the closure of many council-owned public toilets over the last few years have made it even more important that local authorities work with other people to ensure access for all to their communities.

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22400&LangID=E>

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-45009337>

³ <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130314011334/>

<http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2005-2006/rrep400.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.marketingweek.com/2017/10/05/retailers-risk-losing-249bn-ignoring-disabled-consumers/>

⁵ <https://www.scope.org.uk/media/disability-facts-figures>

⁶ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wheelchair-services/>

⁷ <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-us/policy-and-influencing/dementia-uk-report>

⁸ <https://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/myths-facts-stats.aspx>

⁹ <https://www.rnib.org.uk/professionals/knowledge-and-research-hub/key-information-and-statistics>

¹⁰ <http://www.colostomyuk.org/information/what-is-a-stoma/>

Further Information

You can find an electronic version of this guide with links to further information on our website at www.accessiblespaces.co.uk. The website also has training materials, including a leaflet with "top tips" for changes people can make to improve their toilets and a film in which people tell their own stories and explain what would improve access for them.

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