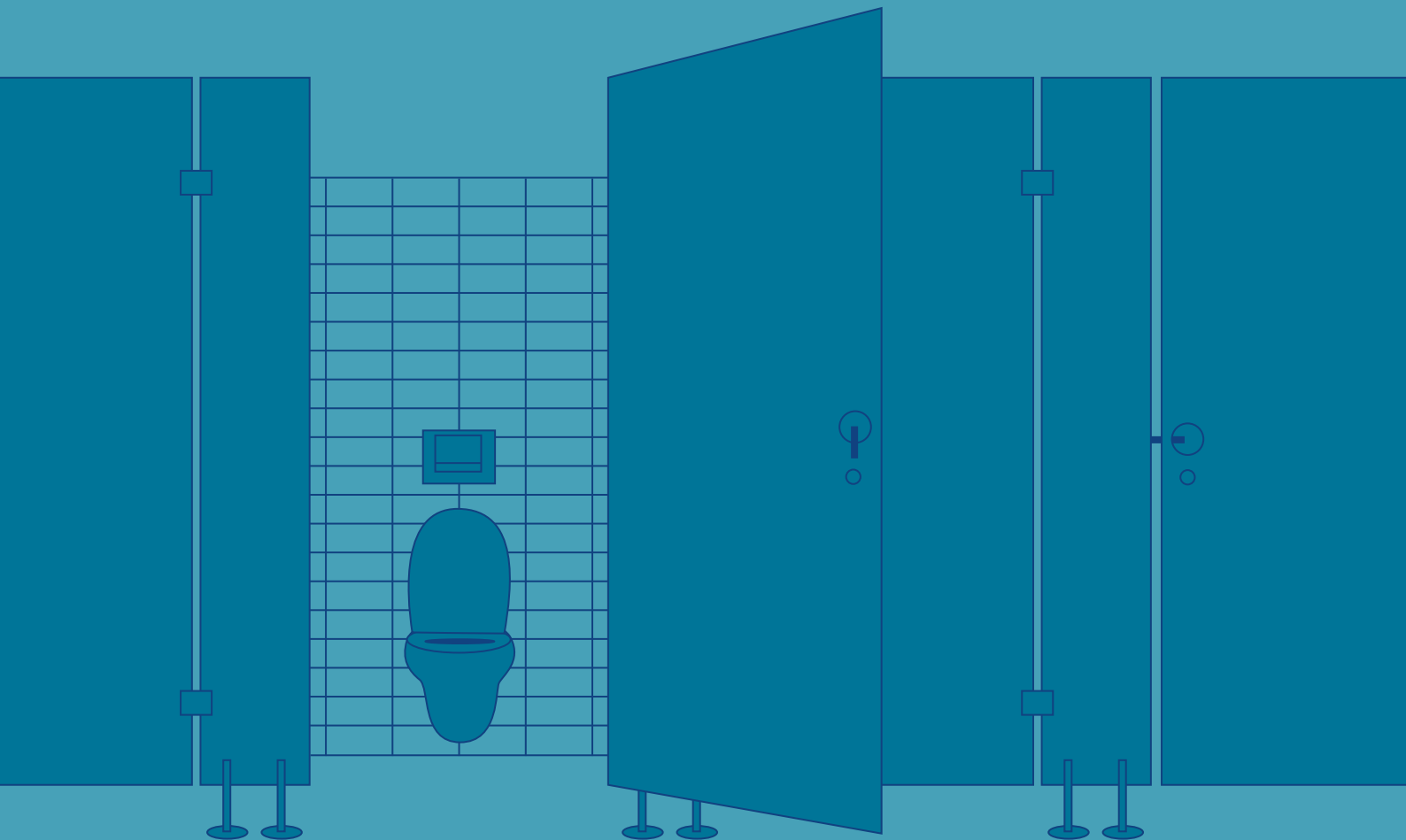




THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST

# Exploring Accessibility and Inclusion in Public Toilets

2018 Rodney Warmington Churchill Fellow to increase accessibility and inclusion in public toilets by researching taboos, design, policy and legal barriers



REPORT BY **KATHERINE WEBBER**, *Churchill Fellow*

# Executive Summary



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## Project Introduction, Description and Purpose

I was interested in exploring how barriers to accessibility and inclusion in public toilet design, policy and legislation are being addressed across the world as toilets support the active inclusion of all people in public spaces. Where toilets are not provided, or there are barriers to their access or use, this contributes to the exclusion of an individual or group of people from the public space. Between March and May 2019, I travelled to the United States, Canada, England, Scotland, Ireland, The Netherlands and Germany. I had 28 meetings with community groups, community representatives, advocates and activists, academics, toilet manufacturers, government, business, social enterprise, non-government organisations, library staff and toilet enthusiasts. The topics covered across the meetings were broad, but all focused on how to meet the basic human need of going to the toilet.

In addition to these meetings I was able to attend the 63rd Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York. The priority theme of CSW was *social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls*. The priority theme was in perfect alignment with my Churchill Fellowship research and attending CSW provided a rich experience and I talked with many organisations from across the world that I would not otherwise have been able to visit.

This report reflects conversations I had exploring innovative solutions to support inclusive and accessible public toilets. Ultimately the planning, provision and maintenance of public toilets supports the dignity, humanity and human rights of people and it is time to amplify the discussion in Australia.

## Intended Audience

I have written this report from a social planning perspective, aiming the report at state and local level government policy makers, as well as planners and designers. But I also hope that this report is of interest to community members and to toilet users, so that they can advocate for better provision of more inclusive public toilets across Australia.

## Highlights

Highlights of the Fellowship included:

- Discussing toilet needs with trans people, unhoused people, people with physical disabilities and those who require additional support, people with invisible disabilities, people who menstruate, and parents and carers
- Meeting with community advocacy groups and toilet enthusiasts to discuss better ways to increase inclusion and accessibility and hold toilet providers accountable
- Meeting with toilet manufacturers on how they are creating innovate designs and responsive technology
- Visiting Crossness Pumping Station, built 1865 as part of London's first city-wide sewerage system that eliminated cholera from London
- Attending the 63rd Commission on the Status of Women, participating in discussions on the theme *social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls* and meeting women committed to delivering social change from around the world
- Finding fellow toilet enthusiasts in each country, including on the London Loo Tour
- Spending a day in Sheffield discussing the Around the Toilet project with key members of the project team
- Exploring the diversity of public toilets in each of the cities I visited and taking photographs capturing the similarities and differences.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

**SECTION 1** provides a snapshot of toilet user experiences, indicating the diversity of needs to be addressed in the provision of public toilets. Toilet experiences can illicit relief, fear, frustration, disgust or embarrassment. The importance of single-gender toilets was promoted by some to ensure safety, prevent period shaming and bullying. Yet for other individuals and groups the removal of gendered spaces will increase inclusivity, use and safety. Design alone cannot address the needs of all toilet users and needs to be supported with a conversation about social norms, inclusion, use, safety and acceptance.

### **Recommendations:**

- 1.1 Develop processes to ensure community input into public toilet location and design to ensure public toilets are meeting identified community needs, including those of minority groups.
- 1.2 Explore community dialogue mechanisms to support conversations around public toilets and user experiences to build empathy.
- 1.3 Further research on the provision of sex or gendered segregated spaces, perceptions of safety, inclusion, exclusion and religious requirements and what other mechanisms are required to support de-gendered inclusive and safe spaces.

**SECTION 2** covers examples of policy, legislation, standards and strategy in relation to public toilets. A commonality across each of the places I visited was that there was no legislative requirement for government to provide toilets in public spaces. A consequence of the lack of legislative requirement for the provision of toilets is the varying levels of coverage and the reduction in provision. Yet, the provision of public toilets is strongly linked to achieving both human rights and anti-discrimination legislation, as well as supporting tourism,

transport, public health and physical exercise strategies. Policy and legislation can encourage and support a change in social norms surrounding toilet use. In both the Portland and New York City examples it was important to have leadership from the top and clear communication indicating what the new social norms were expected to be. However, with the development of new legislation there needs to be caution to ensure that it does not criminalise vulnerable populations or increase vulnerability.

#### **Recommendations:**

- 2.1 Develop a legislative requirement for the provision of public toilets across local government areas, open space and transport networks, which includes:
  - Acknowledgement that access to toilets is a basic human right and supports inclusion and dignity
  - An audit of the existing provision of public toilets
  - Community engagement to determine local needs.
- 2.2 Review and revision of existing building and amenity standards and specifications to meet changing community standards with respect to advancement in accessibility technology, gender inclusion and other community generated issues.
- 2.3 Chambers of commerce and tourism agencies to explore strategies to increase the promotion of toilet location, features and opening hours, to support the achievement of economic development and tourism strategies.
- 2.4 Public toilet provision for transport users to be included in all transport network plans.

**SECTION 3** demonstrates that public toilets cannot be separated from the infrastructure they rely on for their effective use. The infrastructure that supports sewerage and public toilets varies across cities and countries, however it needs to be robust against local environmental elements such as weather, climate change and natural

disasters. Toilet design, operation and maintenance should be responsive to the location, local conditions and operational structure. Gender empowerment and youth engagement can also be addressed through programs that support maintaining infrastructure.

#### **Recommendations:**

- 3.1 New and existing infrastructure should be fortified against climate change and natural disasters.
- 3.2 Explore scaling up alternative technologies to address environmental sustainability and reduction of water use.
- 3.3 Develop locally responsive toilet designs, operation and maintenance protocols.
- 3.4 Include gender and youth focus in infrastructure programs.

**SECTION 4** explores examples of public toilet design from the countries I visited. The lived experience and assumptions of designers can lead to exclusion through design, which can have gendered, ability and sexuality impacts and implications. However, design can remedy exclusion through inclusive design methods, which can create solutions that work for many users. The design of public toilets can be responsive to the different needs of the day and night-time economy, rural and urban areas, and different users. Being able to access information about which toilets are available and when, can assist those who need to plan before leaving home. Apps and signage can be useful tools to locate toilets, however the information must be kept up to date. It can be efficient if one organisation is responsible for the data collection.

#### **Recommendations:**

- 4.1 New toilets and upgrades to existing toilet infrastructure should consider public toilet design principles (see text box).
- 4.2 Develop Australia-wide desired standards of service for provision in specific locations such as town centres, parks, recreation areas.

## PUBLIC TOILET DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Each toilet will be different responding to the local context and needs. Rather than list each of the items to be included in a toilet I have provided some design principles to consider when it comes to public toilets in response to user and operator requirements:\*

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- **SAFETY & PRIVACY** – All users want to feel safe, and have both audible and visual privacy, when using a toilet as it is private and vulnerable human function
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- **ACCESSIBILITY** – Design must meet the specific user needs including minimal standards for physical accessibility. This also includes circulation spaces, handles and height of fixtures and features
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- **INCLUSION** – Design to meet the needs of all populations, including minority groups. This includes a preference to single stall physical designs, signage that reflects all bodies and the review and enforcement of anti-discrimination policies
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- **LOCATION & AVAILABILITY** – Toilets need to be easily locatable and provided in the appropriate number to respond to the number of users. This includes how far people need to travel to access them
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- **ATTRACTIVENESS** – Aesthetics are important to make people feel comfortable. The design of the toilets should be a continuation of the place it is located in
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- **EASE OF MAINTENANCE & HYGIENE** – Materials used in the construction need to allow for easy cleaning, resistance to vandalism and durable while still being functional and welcoming
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- **SUSTAINABLE** – Design and maintenance needs to consider the use of resources such as water and electricity
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- **COMMUNICATION** – Toilets need to be easy to find via signage or apps, include relevant information about operating hours and maintenance requests as well to be able to determine if a stall is available or occupied from a distance

\* Informed by Design Principles for Public Restrooms in the PHLUSH Public Advocacy Toolkit and seven criteria for a needs-based provision of public toilets in the Berlin Toilet Concept.

**SECTION 5** identifies some of the organisations and professions involved in public toilet provision, accessibility, inclusion and operations. With financial austerity impacting government budgets it is important to support industry and other groups in the provision and promotion of accessible and inclusive public toilets. Without a legislative requirement ensuring their provision, toilets can easily be perceived as an on-going expense and liability contributing to their closure. However, it is important that public toilets are seen as investment in social inclusion. When people can easily use a space, they will enjoy it and relax potentially spending more time and more money, which also contributes to an increase in social connections and reduction in isolation.

#### **Recommendations:**

- 5.1 Acknowledge the complementary and essential roles that different professions and community groups have in the provision, operation and maintenance of public toilets; and explore opportunities for collaboration and information sharing
- 5.2 Explore the opportunities to formalise public access to toilets provided by businesses and industry
- 5.3 Support community groups, academics and research institutions to identify local needs to ensure that the limited resources for toilet provision, design and maintenance are being applied where they are most needed
- 5.4 Explore further research in Australia on discrimination, access, inclusion and personal experiences of public toilet use, similar to the Around the Toilet model.

The final section of the report focuses on menstrual health and toilets and is written to be a standalone section of the report. As part of the Fellowship I intentionally arranged to meet with organisations and individuals who are addressing the stigma and taboo around menstruation through education, advocacy, building networks and creative pursuits. Menstruation has an important intersection with public toilets as approximately 26% of the Australia population is menstruating and menstruation is an activity that intersects with toilets, yet it may not be designed or well catered for. Recommendations have been developed for community engagement and education, access to menstrual products, toilet design, policy and legislation and research.

#### **Implementation and Dissemination of Findings**

There are a range of strategies that I will use to disseminate the findings of this report. These include promoting the report, including highlights and recommendations, via social media through Instagram and Twitter, and submitting an extract of this report to a range of Australian and international conferences relating to public health, water and sanitation, social inclusion, and urban design. The opportunity to present my Churchill Report and experiences with local and state governments and other key stakeholders across Australia responsible for the planning, design and maintenance of public toilets will be essential in generating pathways for collaboration for more inclusive public toilets.

I will strive to change the conversation around toilets in Australia.

*Have we ever granted toilets – and especially public toilets – their due? Have we given them credit for how they've helped grow our world? As gross or goofy or quotidian as they may seem, public toilets represent higher notions and beliefs. Fundamentally: who is in and who is out. Whom we see as part of the city. Whom we see as human.* LEZLIE LOWE<sup>1</sup>

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