

From: Gail Knight <gail.knight@network.rca.ac.uk>
Date: 3 August 2010 17:23:14 BST
To: jane.ellison.mp@parliament.uk
Subject: Government & Public Toilets

Dear Ms Ellison,

As my local MP, I would like your advice on how Government works. I am working on a project to improve public toilets for older people. This is also a long term personal interest of mine.

I warn you and apologise that my email is long, but it's not half as long as the reports I had to read before writing it!

The History

In the 2007-08 session, the Department of Communities and Local Government Select Committee looked into the Provision of Public Toilets. They produced an excellent report, The Twelfth Report, with excellent Recommendations.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmcomloc/636/636.pdf>

(I don't expect you to read these links! They're just for clarity)

While the select committee was working on this, the Government (i.e The Dept of Communities & Local Gvt) produced a Strategic Guide - "Improving Public Access to Better Quality Toilets".

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/713772.pdf>

This is good and informative assuming it falls into the right hands at the local councils (which is a big if).

So far so good.

The Government (DCLG) then issued a Response to the Recommendations of the Select Committee in Jan 09, which makes me angry!

<http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm75/7530/7530.pdf>

The Problem

The general impression that I am left with from the above 'Response' document is that each Recommendation is answered with 'No, but we did write this Guide which everyone Loves!', and makes the whole Select Committee process seem

like a waste of time. Yes, the guide is good, but the Recommendations say it's not enough; other specific things are needed, which the Response ignores.

But,

There are two bits that I really hate!

Bit One:

Committee:

Recommendation 26

... For this reason, we recommend that the Government imposes a duty on each local authority to develop a strategy on the provision of public toilets in their areas, which should include consultation with the local community and which should be reviewed annually... The way in which local authorities plan and utilise their own strategic plan is a decision for them...

Response: *The Government considers that decisions about the provision of local services and amenities, such as public toilets, are best made at local level. Therefore we have devolved powers, resources, and flexibilities to local authority partnerships, while taking concerted action to empower communities so people have more influence over local decisions.*

The committee recommends a strategy whereby the content and plan for provision is left entirely to the local council, and the public are consulted. The government rejects it because they want to leave the provision entirely to the local council, and they're trying to empower the public to let their views be known.

That's more or less the same thing.

The thing is, local authorities do not have a duty to provide toilets, although most do. but by imposing a duty to develop a strategy, the government could ensure that Every council values and develops this provision, which many do not since, after all, they don't Have to provide them. The councils that currently have good toilets already have strategies, so no one's being penalised. What's the problem?

Bit Two:

Committee:

Recommendation 2

It appears that the overall number of public toilets has declined in recent years, but the lack of reliable data makes it impossible to know for sure. We recommend that the Government seeks a means of collecting this data,

either through requiring local authorities to provide figures from their own areas or by charging the Audit Commission with resuming its collection of accurate information on the provision of public toilets. We appreciate that there are costs associated with this data collection exercise, but it is essential for formulation a public toilet strategy.

Response: The Government is trying to reduce the amount of information that Local Authorities are asked to provide because we want to reduce the burdens placed on them, and so free up their resources to respond to local demands for improved public services.

...in order to gain a true picture of public access to toilets, data would need to be collected not only on local authorities toilets but privately run toilets and the large array of facilities in public buildings and places of business that are available for public use. ...we consider that it would be an excessive reporting requirement for local authorities and would be difficult to justify.

So, while we agree 'A' would be useful, 'A' and 'B' would be even better, but that's not possible. therefore we won't do anything..

This is driving me mad.

Whilst making sure that there are adequate public toilets is one problem for older people (and everyone else), being able to find the facilities that are already there is also a huge area of opportunity.

I have thought of many ideas for maps, applications and services that help you find toilets, as have many other people in the country. However to make even a simple map of UK Toilets, you need to know where they are, i.e. you need a database of every public toilet. And this doesn't exist. It's exists for schools, health services, even post boxes, but no one could tell you where all the toilets are.

So for future developments, such as an Iphone App or Web page with search function, it's, well, not possible. The ones that exist rely on the public to submit information, which no site seems to moderate so often they may include Cafe Nero which might have a code on the door, but not the Public Toilet or the cafe that's received £600 from the council to open it's toilets to the public through a Community Toilet Scheme, like the one they have in Wandsworth Borough.

Even if one was to contact 300-400 councils through Freedom of Information Acts, that would only tell you the location of toilets At That Time. A year later and your map is already out of date.

This data would have allowed private developers to create maps, apps, guide books all containing the information. This would, ironically, have saved local government money, since 1) they wouldn't have to print their own maps of their own little areas, 2) more people would find the toilets, use the toilets, and therefore they wouldn't be abandoned and become ill-maintained and places for criminal activity. There are a squillion other non-financial benefits as well.

Therefore this seemingly flippant response from government has made improvements to finding public toilets impossible for the immediate future.

So what?

It seems ironic that this was the response of the last government since allowing local authorities make their own decisions seems to me an Conservative policy, however I don't believe that either of these recommendations goes against this policy.

I agree that the burdens and bureaucracy placed on local councils should be reduced, but do so in areas where there are excessive burdens and bureaucracy. Don't penalise a service like public toilet provision, which has absolutely no burdens or bureaucracy - it's a voluntary provision! - just to make a point!

Public Toilet provision is extremely dependent on context and location; of course there's no One-Size-Fits-All and these decisions should be made locally, but people do not need to know where the facilities are just in their own district/borough (they know these areas well). They need to know when they're visiting other areas, and to know that every area has a provision that's of national standard.

That's why I feel that a Local Toilet Strategy and National Toilet Database are ideas that the new Government should implement.

but

I don't know how to do this.

I don't know who in the DCLG to contact, as I don't know which part of Local Government public toilets falls under (another ridiculous anomaly - try finding it on a local government website - is it Waste Services? Parks? Street Furniture? Community? I've seen all of the above).

I don't know how to argue with a response that's already been written - do I just wait another 10 years until another Select Committee does all the work again, only for the recommendations to be shot down?

I know it's a long shot, but I would really appreciate any advice that you can give on how government works, how to get this matter raised or who to raise it with.

Thank you for your time,

best wishes,

Gail

(My home address)

and

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<http://www.hhc.rca.ac.uk/2439/all/1/Tact3.aspx>

<http://people.brunel.ac.uk/~tact3/index.php>