

**Submission
No 31**

INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC TOILETS

Organisation: Continenence Foundation of Australia

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**Continenence
Foundation
of Australia**

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Introduction

This submission has been prepared by the Continenace Foundation of Australia (The Foundation) for the Parliament of New South Wales, in response to the inquiry into Public Toilets.

The Foundation notes the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry. In this submission the Foundation is responding to the questions which are most relevant to our concerns, which are to promote the interests of all Australians, living with incontinence, and of carers, and to champion the interests of continence health professionals, at national and state levels.

Incontinence is a highly personal and stigmatised condition which can often be treated, improved or better managed. It can also have profound negative effects on those living with incontinence and their carers, restricting their interactions with family, work and the community. Because of the stigma and shame, many people and their carers keep their condition secret, which adds an extra dimension and can lead to social isolation, higher psychological impact and delays in seeking help.

In this submission the Foundation wishes to raise the issue of incontinence in relation to the review of public toilets across New South Wales (NSW). We see this as a unique opportunity to bring to your attention the needs of the significant number of people who are currently living with continence health issues.

This submission includes feedback from people with lived experience of continence health issues. They have been able to articulate their needs very clearly and in what way they should be addressed as part of this review. We welcome the opportunity as the Peak Body for Continence Health in Australia to share their views with the Parliament of NSW.

The Continenace Foundation of Australia

The Continenace Foundation is the peak body for promoting continence (bladder and bowel control) health. The activities of the Foundation include research, policy analysis and policy development, the provision of education and training on continence and health promotion, as well as the provision of information for clinicians, consumers, and the public. The Foundation hosts the extensively used National Continence Helpline staffed by nurse continence specialists. Foundation members, which include clinicians from relevant disciplines, consumers and carers are strong advocates for breaking the silence which surrounds continence health and for improving access to the necessary facilities, aids and equipment and to bladder and bowel health and incontinence management services throughout Australia.

This submission also draws attention to the evidence which demonstrates the necessity of having good access to clean and safe public toilets for the prevention of incontinence and the inclusion of people who live with incontinence. The Foundation believes that the provision of public toilets is not only a basic human right but a key public health and planning concern.

Public toilets: a necessity for people living with incontinence.

The Foundation's [Continenace in Australia, Snapshot Report](#) (2019) sets out data that demonstrates that incontinence impacts on people's social and emotional wellbeing and their ability to engage with the community, with 39% of people who experience incontinence indicating that they are less confident in leaving the house, almost one-third (32%) suggesting that it affects their mental health and wellbeing and one-quarter (25%) indicating that it affects their relationships with family and friends. Many people must plan their activities or schedules around toileting, such as drivers, older people or people with small children. [Data from the UK](#) suggests that this is particularly prominent in people with medical conditions that mean that they need frequent toilet visits, such as diabetes.

Increasing accessibility and inclusion in public toilets

The World Health Organization recognizes access to and use of clean and safe toilets as crucial for public health (WHO, 2018). Public health efforts to improve toilet access and use have largely focused on the prevention of a variety of infectious diseases related to contaminated drinking water, with less public health attention on the need for toilet access to maintain bladder and bowel health and prevent lower urinary tract symptoms (Von Gontard et al, 2017). The Foundation strongly supports the broad messages of the 2018 Report from the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust on [Exploring Accessibility and Inclusion in Public Toilets](#). These are:

The Importance of Public Toilets: Public toilets are essential for health, dignity, and participation in public life. Poorly designed or inaccessible toilets can exclude individuals from public spaces.

Catering to Diverse Needs: Toilets must cater to a wide range of users, including people with disabilities, parents with children, older people, homeless people and the LGBTQIA+ community. Design should consider safety, privacy, accessibility, and inclusivity.

Policy and Legislation: There is a need for legislative requirements to ensure the provision of inclusive and accessible public toilets. Policies should support human rights, anti-discrimination, and public health goals.

Community Involvement: Engaging communities in the design and location of public toilets ensures they meet local needs. Community dialogue can build empathy and support inclusive practices.

Innovative Solutions: Examples from around the world show innovative designs and policies that improve accessibility and inclusivity, such as all-user restrooms and technology-enhanced facilities.

Menstrual Health: Public toilets should support menstrual health by providing privacy, running water, and disposal facilities. Education and free provision of menstrual products can address period poverty and stigma.

Sustainable Infrastructure: Toilets should be designed to withstand local environmental conditions and incorporate sustainable practices to reduce water and energy use.

Collaboration and Partnerships: Effective public toilet provision requires collaboration between government, industry, and community groups. Recognizing that complementary roles of different stakeholders can enhance service delivery.

Research and Advocacy: Further research on public toilet use and experiences can inform better policies and designs. Advocacy is crucial to raise awareness and drive change.

Global Perspective: The report highlights the global nature of the issue and the need for international cooperation to share best practices and solutions.

These messages emphasize the need for inclusive, accessible, and well-maintained public toilets to support the dignity and participation of all individuals in public life.

The needs of people living with incontinence: the facts

In this context, the Foundation submits that particular attention needs to be paid to the needs of the many Australians who live with incontinence for inclusive, hygienic and accessible public toilet provision. The following facts about the scale of this potential need are brought to the attention of the Inquiry.

Incontinence is a common condition

Incontinence is a highly prevalent condition, affecting people of all ages. In 2023, a review of epidemiological data commissioned by the Foundation shows that 7 million Australians aged 15 and over were affected by some degree of incontinence: an overall increase of 53% since 2010. Women are disproportionately affected with 4.8 million women (67%) living with urinary and/or faecal incontinence, compared to 2 million men (33%). Whilst the prevalence of incontinence increases with age, 71% of people living with incontinence are 65 years or younger. Incontinence is also common in childhood, with significant negative impacts on children's well-being and development, whilst also placing avoidable pressure on families. (All figures from Deloitte Access Economics, 2023).

Incontinence is frequently under-reported to primary health care services by those impacted and is often misdiagnosed or not diagnosed by clinicians. Stigmatization is an added dimension for those experiencing incontinence, and has been found to lead to social isolation, limited life opportunities, and delayed help-seeking (Norton 2007).

Consumer feedback 2024

The Continenace Foundation National Survey

The Foundation conducts an annual survey of 2,000 people. This provides the Foundation with a rich source of data on the perceptions of incontinence across Australia and the impact and experience of people living with incontinence

One of the most profound impacts reported is on health and wellbeing. In the 2024 survey 39% of respondents identified a reluctance to leave home. 56% of people with incontinence did not feel supported to participate in community activity. 40% said that they have to ensure that there are toilets nearby when they do go out and 42% carry pads and liners in case they cannot access a toilet or toilets are unsuitable. (CFA National Survey, 2024)

The Great Dunny Hunt (June 2024)

The great Dunny hunt is an annual campaign run by CFA to engage the public in identification of public toilets for the Public Toilet Map. The process includes a survey for participants. The June 2024 survey of 840 participants identified the following:-

- 147 people (17.5%) said that they needed to find a toilet quickly because of incontinence.
- 48% of participants requested access to feminine hygiene products in toilets
- 21.83% of participants requested adult changing tables/facilities
- 154 (18.58%) of participants requested bins and incontinence products in toilets.

NSW Consumer Survey

The Foundation has consulted with a small group of people from our Consumer Network in NSW. Participants have given their permission to use their responses to inform this submission.

Participants were asked to identify what was most important to them when using public toilets.

All participants identified, cleanliness, accessibility and availability of supplies to be most important when using public toilets.

50% of participants identified an overall issue regarding waste disposal especially in relation to the disposal of incontinence pads discreetly and hygienically. This was of particular concern in male toilets.

Participants were also asked to suggest improvements they would like to see in public toilets:-

Male toilets should contain an easily and discreetly accessed 'Bins for blokes' bin similar to bins available for sanitary item disposal in female toilets.

More regular cleaning and maintenance

More toilets for women in venues to reduce waiting time in queues was of particular importance for people with incontinence or supporting someone with incontinence.

Disposal bins for continence products should be provided in shopping centres.

More availability of adult changing tables in public toilets and shower facilities.

People with continence health issues may have very specific and sometimes complex needs. Those who need to self-catheterise, for example, require clean areas and clean surfaces to undertake this procedure safely. Cleanliness of public toilets is an issue for many people but those with continence health issues are often more impacted.

Environmental factors & incontinence: an overview

A variety of environmental factors influencing the development and experience of incontinence have been identified (Von Gontard et al, 2017). In children, these encompass stressful life events and trauma, family dysfunction, parental psychopathology, school-

related stressors, toilet or “potty” training, fluid consumption habits, housing conditions, and the availability of toilets. In adults, physical exercise, obesity, working conditions, fluid intake, and the availability of toilets play a role. Intervening variables such as hormonal variations due to work shifts have also been identified as influencing the likelihood of incontinence (Palmer et al, 2018) .

It is important to note that access alone is not the only issue of concern. The literature provides evidence that individuals are deterred from using available toilet facilities if they are perceived to be unclean or unsafe (John et al, 2013; Hafskjold et al, 2016). This appears to be particularly detrimental to women's bladder and bowel health (Cumming et al, 2011; Reynolds et al, 2020). Compounding this problem, there appears to be sex-based discrimination in the [availability of public toilets](#) for women internationally. People with mobility challenges, including older people living in residential care and children and adolescents with disabilities in school settings are deterred by the quality and cleanliness of the facilities available and inability to access them swiftly when they need to do so (Jerez Roig et al, 2016; Stephens at al, 2018; Whale et al; 2018). Studies indicate that individuals with mobility impairments generally take longer to use the toilet due to the need for additional space, assistance and the use of mobility aids (Matthews et al, 2022). This can include the time taken to transfer from a wheelchair to the toilet and back. Lack of swift access to toilets is also reported by people with health conditions such as inflammatory bowel diseases (Dibley & Norton, 2013; Neilson, 2024).

Broader health impacts of lack of public toilet access

In addition to the profound exclusion experienced by many people living with incontinence a range of risks to health and wellbeing arise from a lack of public access to toilets. These include:

Health risks: limited access to public toilets can lead to health issues such as urinary tract infections and skin problems due to delayed urination or reliance on incontinence products (Brady et al, 2018).

Mental Well-being: The fear of not finding a toilet can cause anxiety and stress, leading many to avoid leaving their homes. This social isolation can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and depression (Crohn's & Colitis UK). 2021

Social and Economic Impact: People with incontinence may limit their participation in social activities, work, and travel because of lack of access to public toilets. This restriction can reduce quality of life and economic opportunities (Deloitte Access Economics, 2023; Smoyer et al, 2023)

Public health impacts. Reductions in public toilet facilities has broader public health implications including discouraging outdoor activities and contributing to sedentary lifestyles. (Owen at al, 2020)

Addressing these issues requires improving public toilet availability and accessibility, promoting inclusive designs, and raising awareness about the needs of people with incontinence.

National & international initiatives for public toilet provision

The following national & International initiatives aim to make public spaces more inclusive and accessible, particularly for individuals with incontinence and other health conditions.

1. [The national public toilet map](#). This initiative, funded by the Australian government, provides a comprehensive map of over 23,000 toilet facilities across Australia. It includes details on accessibility, opening hours and additional features like baby change facilities and showers. This tool is particularly useful for people with incontinence, helping them plan their outings with confidence.
2. BINS4Blokes [BINS4Blokes website](#) is a Continenace Foundation of Australia national advocacy campaign to promote the need for continence product disposal bins in male public toilets, and to raise awareness about male incontinence and where to seek help .
BINS4Blokes Partners include key health and professional bodies and organizations who share a commitment to men's health by improving the lives of males living with incontinence, and by providing a united platform to advocate and promote BINS4Blokes.
3. The [UK's Campaign for Public Infrastructure](#). This campaign advocates for better public toilet facilities by urging local councils to increase visibility, extend opening hours and leverage planning laws to fund new toilets. The campaign also proposes initiatives such as adding a small levy to public transport transactions to fund toilet maintenance and the **Community Toilet Schemes**. These schemes involve local businesses opening their toilets to the public. Councils collaborate with businesses providing incentives and signage to ensure high standards and increased footfall.
4. Changing Places <https://changingplaces.org.au/>. Changing Places provide suitable facilities for people who are not accommodated by standard accessible toilets. Changing places facilities include a height-adjustable adult-sized change table. A constant-charging ceiling track hoist system and a centrally located peninsula toilet.

These resources and data highlight the importance of accessible public toilets and the need for continued support and awareness to improve the quality of life for those living with incontinence.

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