

**Submission
No 52**

INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC TOILETS

Organisation: Dubbo Regional Council

Date Received: 29 November 2024

FILE12/1947
ED24/223826
MW:lg



29 November 2024

To whom it may concern

SUBMISSION - PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 8 – CUSTOMER SERVICE INQUIRY INTO, AND REPORT ON, PUBLIC TOILETS

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Portfolio Committee No. 8 – Customer Service Inquiry into, and report on, public toilets.

It is noted that in correspondence to Dubbo Regional Council (DRC), the Inquiry Chair, as part of encouraging DRC to make a submission, stated that:

“it is anticipated that concerns about the design and construction of the Lions Parks West public toilets in Dubbo will be raised”.

Whilst Council staff were preparing to make a submission in accordance with the terms of reference of the Inquiry, it was not intended to be focused on details of an individual project. Given the direct call out by the Inquiry Chair, Council welcomes the opportunity to put some specific detail before the Inquiry as part of its broader submission.

In regard to the matter of the Lions Park West amenities, it is important to understand the context of Council decision making and then to provide information on construction and design matters.

As the Inquiry members would know, there has been the post Covid housing crisis that in many ways continues in regional NSW. As part of considering ways to stimulate new ways of providing housing more quickly, Council resolved the following at its May 2022 Ordinary meeting of Council:

1. *That Council set aside up to four residential blocks from the Stage 5 Release 3 of Keswick residential land release to enable a trial of 3D printed housing stock subject to regulatory guidelines.*
2. *That the CEO provide a report to the Ordinary Council Meeting in September 2022 that addresses:*
 - a. *Regulatory issues pertaining to 3D printed housing in NSW and Australia*
 - b. *Defines the framework by which Council would meet its legislative obligations, minimises costs to Council and attracts competitive proposals to use Council residential land to trial 3D printing technology suitable for the regional NSW housing market.*



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There was a strong response to this resolution from media with coverage nationally and then industry stakeholders associated with 3D printing. This included Australian businesses and international interest. The Mayor and the Councillor who moved the motion, in conjunction with relevant staff, met with a number of proponents who had 3D printing building capability of various levels. It should be noted that the relevant stage of Keswick was not yet developed so there was not then a commercial opportunity via a public procurement process to develop the four residential blocks.

With significant interest in this relatively new technology that had the potential to shorten construction times, the elected body considered a report from staff at its August 2022 Ordinary meeting that proposed using the existing budget for an amenity block renewal to formally sound the market via a tender process for 3D printed construction of amenities. The basis of that report was:

- Dubbo Regional Council had the opportunity to undertake a pre-trial of 3D printing of a significant structure through the scheduled replacement of the Lions Park West amenity block.
- This amenity block was due for renewal in the then current financial year (2022/2023) with the necessary funds already allocated.
- By undertaking this as a trial it provided Dubbo Regional Council a unique opportunity to observe how the printing process is undertaken at a relatively low risk level and identify any concerns prior to industry more broadly embarking on the printing of residences.

In this regard, Council resolved:

- 1) *That, due to the limited number of companies currently undertaking 3D printing of buildings, Council undertakes a Select Call for tenders to identify a suitably qualified and experienced contractor for the replacement of the Lions Park West amenity block.*
- 2) *That all documentation in relation to this matter remain confidential to the Council (under the tender provisions of legislation).*

Subsequently, a procurement process was undertaken in line with relevant legislative and regulatory requirements with a contract ultimately awarded to Contour 3D.

A further report was considered by Council at its September 2022 Ordinary meeting that detailed the regulatory and legislative pathways by which 3D printed construction for residential housing can be approved i.e. under the Performance Solution provisions of the Building Code of Australia. Consultation included the University of NSW and the Australian Building Codes Board.

It is acknowledged there was critique of the project and methodology on at least one social media platform page, arguably a page dedicated to critiquing Council on a significant number of matters as is typically found in all Local Government Areas. This fed some local mainstream media interest. There was, in a search of records, very limited complaints or queries received by Council through its normal/official customer channels.

As with any construction procurement, there was a 12 month defect liability period and that has rectified any defects that established in that time.

Regarding the construction methodology deployed at Lions Park West, recent developments in Dubbo are arguably positive proof of the worth of Council's approach to stimulating innovation in construction methodologies to address housing shortages.

Council, by developing an understanding of the development approval pathway and the demonstrated knowledge of implementing the technology, had created the confidence in the industry for the Aboriginal Sustainable Housing (ASH) Group and the Aboriginal Housing Office to commence construction of a duplex social housing development in Dubbo. The first social and affordable 3D printed house in Australia with Contour 3D, the technology provider, as they were for Lions Park West amenities. As a wall technology, it is quicker to build than traditional methods, resilient to damage (strength of 50 MPa) and very thermally efficient (7.9 NABERS rating) thereby reducing costs for both the housing owner (AHO) and the tenant.

In terms of service to community and in response to the "concerns about the design", Council provides the following advice.

The previous amenity block had stairs to access any part of the internal facilities, no all-abilities amenity access at all, very narrow cubicles and all with poor ventilation.

The new 3D printed amenity block has:

- An all-abilities (disabled) toilet built in accordance with AS1428.1 (Design for Access and Mobility) with a doorway of a 920mm opening. Initially it was fitted with a MLAK key but in response to community feedback Council has kept that part of the facility open in line with the other elements. It should be noted that the intent of a MLAK key system was to keep the room secure from vandalism as all-abilities toilets have been subject to vandalism in other areas of the urban environment of the LGA. This part of the facility is unisex.
- Level ground entry to all amenities, noting there is male and female allocated spaces in addition to the unisex all-abilities toilet.
- Been utilised well by community. Events held at Lions Park West include, but are not limited, to Eid celebrations for the Islamic community and a large Pacifika community function amongst the more regular lower levels of family and individual use. The ability to have more individual toilets means event holders have more certainty regarding costs knowing there are sufficient amenities for their anticipated crowd.
- In terms of thermal comfort performed well which is important in a climate experiencing very hot weather and with maximum temperatures projected to increase by 2.5 degrees over coming years as climate change outcomes are realised.

Using the Lions Park West amenities as a case study, it would suggest that the Inquiry Committee should be cautious around recommending that a central government should dictate design solutions for a local community beyond Australian Standards and building codes. The Lions Park West amenity block highlights the ability of local government to address more than one issue in

the one project. For Lions Park West that includes considerations such as stimulating housing construction innovation, asset renewal budgeting and levels of service in its open space network. Ultimately local government is accountable to its community through the democratic process.

If the Committee determines there should be intervention in enforcing design requirements, then an approach that could be considered is that taken by the Minister for Planning in developing and having adopted a NSW Housing Pattern Book. For a “Public Amenity Pattern Book” there could be a stimulus lever such as easier access to grants or complying DA approvals but not a restriction on how a Council can individually address community needs through a locally driven place-based solution i.e. a local government authority can choose not to use the pattern book typology.

The need for flexibility and an ability to meet changing philosophies in design of public amenities is drawn out in a paper in ArchDaily by Jonathon Yeung (November 11, 2024): Spatial Equity in Urban Infrastructures: Public Restrooms Addressing Women’s Needs states:

“The design of public bathrooms and changing facilities has historically catered to a generalized notion of user needs, often oversimplifying the complexities of gender-specific requirements and falling short of supporting the unique needs of women. These needs extend beyond biological differences—such as the necessity for more stall privacy and differences in height and body posture—to include cultural factors that influence restroom use and expectations over time.

For instance, women's contemporary clothing often lacks adequate pocket space, resulting in the need to carry a handbag, even for simple essentials like phones and wallets. Despite efforts in recent architectural designs to address these disparities, the layered nuances of biological, cultural, and gender identity factors present a multifaceted challenge that defies a one-size-fits-all solution.”

Further the author goes on to state:

“A significant design shift in recent years has been the rise of unisex bathrooms, intended to promote equality by standardizing facilities for all genders. While this approach appears equitable on the surface, it often overlooks the biological and cultural differences in how different genders use bathrooms. By homogenizing bathroom spaces and fixture counts in the name of equality, are designers simply sidestepping the nuanced challenges of spatial equity? Achieving genuine user equity in diverse populations requires more than uniformity.”

This is but one paper that has been used to highlight the ever-changing nature of thinking around service provision to community. A “Public Amenity Pattern Book” type approach would need to allow for such changes.

Design for amenities also needs to consider safer by design principles regarding placement, orientation and access on the way to and from amenities. Considering safety by design principles is more than a consideration of internal layout regarding single cubicles or clusters of cubicles in a room of an amenity block. Take an amenity block delivered for \$495,297 (FY19-20) in Church

Street, Dubbo, that is in the central part of the CBD. It was delivered with the very worthy intent of providing disability accessible toilets and adult changing rooms in the Dubbo CBD environment thereby generating and supporting more foot traffic in the precinct as well as providing a needed public service to community. It should be noted that the location landed upon was not part of any strategic plan/master planning adopted by Council.

Whilst the facilities are used by the broader community, they have also been subject to anti-social behaviour, and it would seem an agglomeration point for this behaviour has in effect been created in this central CBD environment. Businesses in the CBD have provided feedback that they would like the amenities moved as they believe its presence affects CBD businesses negatively. Police have previously provided advice that the orientation and scale of the amenity block has created an attractive location for antisocial/ criminal behaviour by limiting or being perceived to be limiting passive surveillance. This raises the issues of the need for good strategic planning being a required tool that moves through issues of spatial arrangement, social context, risks and so on in consultation with community.

The intent was positive to place modern all-abilities toilet amenities in the CBD but, as with all projects, there are lessons to be learned related to our specific community experience that we can apply to the design and implementation of future projects including future strategic planning for the CBD. A central government led approach would not be nimble enough to learn those very localised issues so any recommendations envisaged by the Inquiry Committee must allow the flexibility for a local government authority to respond to local conditions and apply previous lessons learned. A learning in this case is that new externally funded amenities should be required as part of a funding application to show evidence of strategic planning informed by community consultation.

More broadly Council manages 22 public toilets (not including those associated with sporting facilities or internal to Council services such as the regional theatre etc) across the local government area. These facilities range dramatically in style, age and level of facility provided. At the bottom end of the range are single cubicle units (either composting or dropping directly into a septic tank) through to higher level facilities that include unisex/ambulant toilets, disabled facilities and adult changing rooms that are fully equipped with a hoist, adult changing tables, and other supporting infrastructure.

The age of these facilities ranges from c1960 through to 2023. Many of the facilities, including the recent 3D printed amenity block at Lions Park West, are based on gender division with an internal space for handwashing and internal cubicles opening onto this space. Other facilities are unisex / ambulant toilet cubicles that open directly outside, usually with a front privacy screen and external hand washing basins. A recent survey (97 contributors) carried out by Dubbo Regional Council for new amenities at Victoria Park (the major central park in Dubbo) identified a strong response favouring external exiting cubicle, disability toilet and urinal space, though this is not universal. Some comments are provided below:

- *There are no separate spaces for male & female. Absolutely not acceptable to have unisex toilets. It's also risky to have the doors open directly into the park. At least a privacy screen should be considered.*
- *Please make all individual cubicles for safety.*
- *They need a cubicle for parents, with easy access for prams with a change table and a child's toilet and adult's toilet in the same area.*
- *No need for accessible, more toilets would be better with time locks on all of them.*
- *Separate men's and women's.*
- *Numerous Westfield and similar shopping centres have parents' cubicles which have full sized toilet and child's toilet in the same cubicle - given it is close to children's playground this should be strongly considered. This further should be externally accessible/unisex so fathers/males taking their children to playground have access/not just mothers in a female section. Please also consider flooding the cubicles with natural light so they aren't always dark and damp areas.*
- *There is a need for child size amenities as this is a very popular park for families with young children and there is a need for a space where adults of either sex can safely take their child to the toilet.*

A word cloud was also produced from the community consultation:

To understand what inclusions could be considered, contributors were asked to suggest inclusions, a total of 73 contributions identified the following key inclusions from the open-ended response.



From a Maintenance Service Level perspective, the community has an expectation that public facilities are in an acceptable and clean state, if not 100% of the time, then at least cleaned every day. This expectation needs to be balanced against cost. As a result, different cleaning schedules are applied to different facilities based on park classification and usage.

At the high end of the spectrum, amenities are cleaned twice a day with 'Medium' level park amenities are cleaned daily, five days per week and dropping down to twice per week for 'Low' classified parks in some of the outer reserves and villages. This is supported by a service whereby if customers identify facilities that are "dirty", a clean is organised following an inspection. This service level currently costs Council \$124,000 annually, however tenders have recently closed for

the renewal of the service and it is anticipated that the same level of service will increase in cost by as much as 54%.

Vandalism remains an ever-present problem. Council can expect to budget between \$20k-\$30k annually to respond to vandalism across the public amenity network. Where present, the 'Parents Room' attracts a disproportionate amount of vandalism attention. The folding tables hinged from the wall are especially vulnerable. This is unfortunate as 'Parents Room' do appear to be a popular response from community feedback. Similarly, disability swings are easy targets, as they have moving parts and hinges. At a base level, the more a facility deviates from standard 'toilet and wash basin' provision, the more prone to costly and ongoing vandalism a facility becomes.

To further illustrate how Council can gather data and build an evidence base to strategically consider services such as public amenities, Council has already this financial year engaged an independent consultant to undertake an audit of the public amenities across the DRC Local Government Area. This is from the lens of Council's Community Safety and Crime Prevention Plan and associated bodies of work as well as to inform the capital program of public amenity asset renewals in the forward four-year budget.

Council is buying in the crime prevention and community safety specialist skills that have a focus on making and shaping safer towns and cities, an expertise that has been working in the field for over twenty years. A particular strength of the consultancy is experience in delivering courses on Safer Public Places for Women and Girls – Planning and Designing through the Gender Equity Lens. This is important for Dubbo Regional Council to ensure that women and girls of the differing parts of our community are enabled to participate and have a more inclusive role in making and shaping the urban areas the LGA.

As part of the engagement, the consultant will:

- Complete an audit of all 22 public amenities across the Local Government Area, including those located at reserves and villages.
- Provide advice and recommendations on potential locations for the new amenity block at Victoria Park.
- Provide advice and recommendations on the Cameron Park amenities.
- Provide input and recommendations on the provision and locations of amenities at Dubbo and Wellington cemeteries.

The findings will be provided in a comprehensive Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) Report detailing the key findings and recommendations from the assessments. The assessments will be undertaken in early December with the report expected to staff prior to the 20 December 2024. A report back to a Council Ordinary Meeting in the first half of calendar year 2025 will be provided with recommendations.

It should be noted that after Council staff commenced this analytical work, Council has subsequently resolved at its November 2024 Ordinary Meeting to develop a Public Toilet

Strategy. The consultancy outcomes will now feed into the development of that strategy. Again, the elected body will be accountable to the community through its public decision-making processes.

COMMUNITY SAFETY AND CRIME PREVENTION

Council's Community Safety and Crime Prevention has recently been endorsed by Council for public exhibition. The plan is a culmination of 18 months of consultation with various stakeholder groups across the state and especially our local community. Council staff engaged with other local councils to gauge their experience and approach with contributing to community safety which was an important process in framing out approach to the subject.

Staff conducted information gathering workshops with Councillors and business chamber representatives, established a reference group with government and non-government stakeholders as well as 'pop-up' stalls at various locations and times in Dubbo and Wellington.

Council's web-based community engagement platform titled 'Your Say' was instrumental in engaging with the broader community on community safety concerns. The site nearly 3,000 visits with 419 contributions. From a community engagement perspective these are good numbers. One element of the 'Your Say' design was a 'drop-pin' exercise where contributors were encouraged to identify locations within the LGA where they felt unsafe and provide the reason and ideas to address those concerns. There were 217 pin-drops recorded in total, 201 were in Dubbo, 9 in Wellington with the remainder spread across the villages.

Of the 201 pin-drop locations in Dubbo, the majority were focused in the CBD, the majority of those on the main street (Macquarie street) and the majority of those centred on 9 points of interest. These were pedestrian crossing, public gathering areas, car parks and some ATM locations.

The top three concerns for safety centred around: experiencing anti-social behaviour in general, feeling unsafe after dark and a noticeable contribution from women and girls.

The top 3 interventions recommended from the public were CCTV improvements, Lighting improvements, maintenance and upkeep. These form the focus of Council's 26 actions.

In regard to public toilets and community safety feedback, this was more limited as a response and there was more limited feedback with the 'pin-drop' tool. Only the following three locations and comments were provided:

- *Regand Park – Pin Drop Location*
 - *Comment: One Toilet block is needed near Tamworth St end only. Future developments must not have toilets everywhere for drug addicts to abuse.*
- *Victoria Park Kids Playground: - Pin Drop Location*
 - *Comment: More regular upkeep of facilities they are poorly maintained*
- *Victoria Park – Pin Drop Location*
 - *Comment: Reducing use of toilet cubicles for drug consumption*

- *Sandy Beach Road - Pin Drop Location.*
 - *Comment: One set of toilets locked with men coming into ladies' toilets very unsettling early in the morning when walking on my own.*

In the face-to-face engagement sessions for the Community Safety and Crime Prevention Plan the CBD Business Community provided feedback about the Church Street amenities being a focus for drug use and other anti-social activity. This is distinct from the reference earlier in this submission that related to other channels where Council has received similar advice and concerns.

Regarding design, location and community attitudes it is important to have structure around gathering information that can be considered an accurate reflection of the broader community and their needs and concerns. Whilst Council has communication channels on the ubiquitous social media platforms, people making comments are guided back to Council's engagement platform and have explained as how their views can be collated and considered. What is hopefully illustrated in this submission are the processes and methodologies Council is deploying in continuing efforts to obtain feedback from community to inform strategies and projects across the wide range of services including public amenities.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide a submission.

Yours faithfully

Murray Wood
Chief Executive Officer