

INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC TOILETS

Organisation: City of Newcastle

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Dr Amanda Cohn MLC
Chair
Portfolio Committee No.8 - Customer Services

Reply submitted via online portal

Dear Amanda

Portfolio Committee No 8 – Customer Services Inquiry into Public Toilets

Thank you for inviting City of Newcastle (CN) to contribute to the Parliamentary Inquiry into public toilets. As the second-largest local government area outside Greater Sydney, supporting approximately 202,000 residents, CN currently maintains public toilets at 110 locations, including parks, sporting facilities, libraries, reserves, community centres, public spaces and beaches.

CN welcomes this opportunity and provides the following submission for the Committee's consideration.

Provision, design, accessibility and inclusivity

The strategic placement of public toilets is essential to encourage use, particularly in high-demand areas such as parks, transit hubs, and shopping districts where passive surveillance enhances safety. Community involvement in planning can improve facility alignment with foot traffic, local attractions, and demographic needs, fostering ownership and improving accessibility and usage.

Facilities should cater to diverse needs, including family-friendly restrooms with baby-changing stations and child-specific toilets. Design principles must ensure usability for all, including people with disabilities, the elderly, and families. Touchless fixtures, such as taps and soap dispensers, should be integrated to enhance hygiene and accessibility. Free sanitary product dispensers, linked to phone app registration could be trialled via integration into the structure to prevent vandalism and misuse with an appropriate report back at the conclusion of the trial.

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design principles should be integrated in the design, featuring open sightlines, secure entrances, and adequate internal and external lighting to promote safety. While vandal-resistant materials and fixtures are less aesthetically pleasing, they are most appropriate for these facilities which are frequently damaged and expensive to replace.

Compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act standards is essential including wide doors, wheelchair-accessible interiors and ramps where a level entry is not possible. In terms of wayfinding, comprehensive signage and digital accessibility through mobile apps can assist the community to locate the nearest accessible facilities.

Gender-neutral toilets could be introduced to foster inclusivity for all users, including non-binary, gender-diverse individuals and considerations for cultural needs to enhance usability for all.

Best Practice

Alignment with the NSW's government's smart city initiatives by integrating technology to monitor usage, cleanliness, and supply levels in real-time is ideal, alongside regular audits to meet community needs. Nationally, Brisbane City Council's public toilet guidelines, focusing on safety, sustainability, and strategic location planning, serve as an exemplary model for statewide consistency. Internationally, self-cleaning toilets can reduce maintenance costs and enhance hygiene, provided they are vandal-proof. Environmentally friendly solutions, such as composting toilets, solar-powered facilities and eco-friendly solutions can also be adopted where appropriate.

Regulation and Funding

Statewide minimum standards for the design, maintenance, accessibility, and safety of public toilets would ensure consistency and reliability. Legislation should mandate public toilets in new developments, including private premises like shopping centres and service stations, with enforceable compliance standards for design and maintenance. A state-level funding model could support local councils in building new public toilets, with grants available to retrofit older facilities to modern standards. Additional funding opportunities, such as public-private partnerships, could further enhance services.

Employment arrangements and conditions

A statewide standard aligned with industry best practices would ensure fair and consistent employment conditions for cleaners, including provisions for personal protective equipment, training, adherence to health and safety standards, and access to adequate resources.

Cleaners often work early hours in isolated locations, facing safety risks from vandalism, drug use, and antisocial behaviour. Enhanced safety measures, such as emergency alert systems, surveillance, and on-call support can assist to protect staff. Mental health support and de-escalation training can equip cleaners to manage challenging situations safely and effectively.

Other Matters

Public toilet user-pays systems are used internationally and provide benefits in sustainability, maintenance, and service quality. While the payment is often tokenistic, the system encourages responsible use, and deters misuse and vandalism while helping facilities remain in better condition for longer.

Technology can be used to prevent non-essential or inappropriate use, ensuring cleanliness and availability for those who need it most, and there is opportunity for third-party suppliers to competitively enter the marketplace to provide this service.

Equity can be promoted through targeted subsidies or exemptions for groups such as seniors, individuals with disabilities, people receiving government support, and families with young children, ensuring essential access while providing a fair funding model for public amenities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide recommendations on improving public toilets and updating regulations and best practices. I wish the committee a productive session and look forward to the inquiry outcomes.

If you have any further concerns or suggestions, please contact me on .

Yours faithfully

Robert Dudgeon
EXECUTIVE MANAGER ASSETS & FACILITIES