

INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC TOILETS

Organisation: Dementia Australia

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NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 8

Customer Service inquiry into public toilets

Introduction

Thank you for this opportunity to provide feedback to NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 8 – Customer Service inquiry into public toilets.

We appreciate the invitation to provide information and advice with respect to the preferred design features of public toilets for people living with dementia. We will be specifically addressing the first item listed in the terms of reference accordingly:

- a) the provision, design, accessibility, and inclusivity of public toilets across New South Wales including toilets provided in public places and toilets provided for the use of members of the public in private premises accessed by the public.

Dementia Australia is the national peak body for people impacted by dementia in Australia. We represent the estimated 433,300 Australians living with dementia and the 1.7 million people involved in their care.¹ In NSW in 2025, there are an estimated 141,800 people living with all forms of dementia. This figure is projected to increase to an estimated 252,800 by 2054 with a projected percentage change of 78%. In 2025, there are an estimated 9,200 people living with younger onset dementia in NSW.

¹ Dementia Australia (2023) Dementia Prevalence Data 2024-2054, commissioned research undertaken by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Carer data is based on Dementia Australia's analysis of the following publications - National Dementia Action Plan; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024) 2023 Aged Care Provider Workforce Survey: Summary report, AIHW, Australian Government.

This figure is projected to increase to an estimated 12,800 by 2054 with a projected percentage change of 39%.²

Our organisation engages with people with dementia, their families and carers in our activities, planning, policy, and decision-making, ensuring we capture the diversity of the living experience of dementia across Australia.

Dementia is a broad term that encapsulates more than one hundred different types of dementia associated with a range of cognitive and physical changes but there are some general symptoms characteristic of the condition, including changes in thinking, mood, memory, and behaviour.

People living with dementia may also develop visuospatial symptoms including changes in colour and depth perception, loss of peripheral vision, an increasing inability to read or comprehend the meaning of words including signage, difficulty locating and recognising objects, and broader impacts on way finding and navigation abilities. These changes can have a significant influence on a person with dementia's ability to navigate the built environment, including way finding in public spaces and locating and using public toilets.

The changes many people experience when living with dementia, and the associated impacts on activities of daily living including accessing the toilet, can be exacerbated by the dementia-unfriendly design of many existing public toilets.

It is estimated that two thirds of the 433,300 people currently living with dementia in Australia reside in the community.³ People living with dementia, and their carers and family members, encounter a range of issues in relation to access to and safe use of public toilets.

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022) Dementia in Australia, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 20 January 2023

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022) Dementia in Australia, AIHW, Australian Government, Accessed 20 January 2023.

Feedback from our stakeholders have identified the following as the most significant and urgent issues:

- Confusing and/or lack of signage leading to the toilets and on toilet doors
- Excessive, conflicting, or unfamiliar signage and symbols
- Unfamiliar or unclear design features including tapware and hand drying equipment, toilet paper roll/dispenser, entrance or high-tech door opening/complex door-opening process at the entrance and exit
- Carers and family members having to enter opposite-sex public toilets to guide their partners in and out, or the person living with dementia going through the wrong door and becoming disorientated
- Lack of contrast in and around the toilet - for example between toilet and the floor and basin and the wall, grab rails against the walls and lack thereof, the toilet door, and the toilet roll holder (An object that is white, on a white background, offers no colour contrast and will not be seen and used)
- Poor line of sight to the toilet when opening the toilet door
- No toilet seat - some public toilets do not have a toilet seat, only the steel bowl, and this may not be seen/recognised by a person living with dementia
- Confusing or 'busy' patterns on the floor and walls which can be disorienting and distract from the task at hand
- Shiny and reflective floor surfaces which may be interpreted as being wet or hazardous. A person with dementia may be hesitant to walk on the area and these surfaces can present a falls risk.

The cognitive and physical changes and visuo-spatial issues associated with dementia outlined above, and the challenges that can arise around the easy access to a public toilet, can be mitigated by a dementia-friendly approach to design. We recommend the following features as desirable when considering the design of public toilets that support easy and safe access for people living with dementia.

Supportive signage:

- The sign should contrast with the background on which it is located
- Large font that contrasts with the background of the sign
- Single, contrasting, clear picture of a toilet on the sign to reduce confusion and anxiety, placed at a height of around 1.2-1.4m from the ground and directly on the door

- Avoid patterns on signage as this can create visual clutter and reduce legibility
- Ensure the message of the sign is clear - does it convey the intended message? Is it too complicated and could it be simplified?
- Minimise information on the signage - one message per sign
- Place signs throughout the building leading to and indicating the presence of the toilet and include directional signage such as arrows
- Ensure signage leading the way to the toilet conforms to the height stipulated above
- Add simple pictures demonstrating the use of objects such as the hand dryer, toilet roll dispenser and taps
- If the door is sensor driven or 'high tech,' use simple pictures and instructions on how to open and close the door
- Provide an exit sign in the toilets to assist with exit navigation

Introduce contrast to the design:

- Toilet seat/urinal should contrast in colour to the walls and the floor, so it is easily identified
- Contrasting single coloured panel behind the cistern or urinal
- Contrasting single coloured panel behind the basin
- Prominent red and blue indicators on tapware for hot and cold
- Contrasting coloured grab rails for support
- Contrasting coloured toilet roll holder, placed closer rather than further behind the person so it is in their field of vision (people with dementia can experience loss of peripheral vision)
- Paint the toilet door a contrasting colour to the walls, and paint all toilet doors within the building the same colour for easy location/navigation
- Ensure hook/s on the back of the door are contrasted in colour so it is easily identified
- When designing the toilet/bathroom, ensure the toilet can be easily seen immediately when opening the door i.e. it is in the direct line of sight

Ensure familiarity in public toilet design:

- Familiar and easy to use tapware
- Familiar and simple to use toilet roll holder
- Familiar and easy to use hand dryers with appropriate signage as outlined above and/or familiar and easy to use paper towel dispensers
- Ensure there are no patterns on any surfaces
- Familiar, traditional toilet seats rather than steel, seat-free toilets – or explore alternatives to ensure the toilet looks familiar, is easily recognisable and therefore more accessible

Additional desirable, dementia-friendly design considerations

- Use a matte finish on all surfaces to reduce glare and shine
- Ensure flooring is non-slip
- Ensure there is room under the basin for a wheelchair

In considering how to improve the accessibility of NSW public toilets, including the incorporation of dementia-friendly features, Dementia Australia encourages the active involvement of people living with dementia, family members and carers in all consultations addressing these issues. The input of people with living experience will be critical to the project of designing successful, accessible public toilets. In this context, we draw your attention to our guide on meaningful consultation with people living with dementia: **Half the Story: a guide to meaningful consultation with people living with dementia, families and carers.**

Several other resources provide additional information to inform the design of dementia-friendly and accessible bathrooms and toilets. Our Dementia Australia resource includes a section on dementia-friendly bathroom and toilet design: **Creating a dementia-friendly home**

Professor Mary Marshall, an international expert on design for people with dementia, has developed a free, comprehensive guide to best practice, accessible toilet and bathroom design: **Toilet Talk**

Developed by the Design Dignity Dementia Team (Richard Fleming, John Zeisel, Kirsty Bennett, Golembiewski, Kate Swaffer, and Lynda Henderson), **The Dignity Manifesto of Design – For People Living with Dementia** sets out the most important principles and values underpinning good design for people living with dementia.

Conclusion

The number of people living with dementia in Australia is estimated to double in the next thirty years to an estimated 812, 500 by 2054, with the attendant future demands for well designed, accessible and dementia-friendly public infrastructure, including public toilets.⁴

A well-designed environment that incorporates clear prompts for wayfinding, maximises accessibility and reduces risks, can support people with dementia to maintain their abilities and independence.

Providing dementia-friendly designed public spaces, including public toilets, can play a critical role in ensuring that people living with dementia, and their family members and carers, are supported to be active and engaged in their local community. Incorporating dementia-friendly and accessible features in public toilets represents best practice design that benefits everyone in ensuring inclusivity and access for the whole community.

Dementia Australia would welcome the opportunity to provide more information or to discuss any of the issues raised in this submission in more detail.

The Dementia Australia Policy team can be contacted at

⁴ Dementia Australia (2023) Dementia Prevalence Data 2024-2054, commissioned research undertaken by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

