

AGE UK London Briefing: Increasing public toilet provision – addressing concerns about anti-social behaviour (Comments, reflections, mitigations:)

Background

At the London Borough of Southwark Health and Care Commission meeting on 19th September 2023, John McGeachy (an invited speaker) of Age UK London was asked about considerations around anti-social behaviour and the provision of public toilets. This was part of an item (Item 5) on public toilet provision. Following the meeting, comments on the subject were sought by John McGeachy by email from experts in the field of public toilet provision.

The following are responses sent as part of email conversations. They are specifically responses (verbatim) to the question ‘*What would you say to council officers who are reluctant to create new toilet provision because they are worried about anti-social behaviour.*’

A: London Borough of Tower Hamlets: Kirsty Valentine (Ms), Programme Manager, High Streets Team, Growth & Economic Development Service (GED), Place Directorate

Economic Benefits:

1. Acknowledging the wider economic benefits to the entire community (including business) and positive impact on resident’s health and wellbeing is of more importance than the cost to maintain public toilets.
2. Clean and safer public toilets make for clean & safer High Streets which enables residents, businesses & visitors to stay longer, shop for longer and ultimately spend more money.
3. More footfall and increased customers are needed to create a thriving High Street. Attracting residents to shop local & support local independent businesses in a post covid business environment is paramount for sustained economic growth and development.

We are aware that ASB is a concern for people, and we are addressing this through:

- Attendants on duty – where possible including attendants as their presence deters many forms of ASB.
- High presence of Enforcement officers/police/ASB team.” – ensuring a cross departmental involvement from the beginning & working closely with the ASB team, THEO’s (enforcement officers), the police etc to work collectively and supportively.

B: Sara Carter MBA CMgr MCMI of Sara Carter Business Training and Consulting

“I understand and respect your concerns regarding potential anti-social behavior. It's essential to consider the safety and well-being of our community. However, it's also crucial to recognise that access to clean and safe public toilets is a basic necessity for many residents and visitors.

To address these concerns proactively, various strategies can be implemented, such as regular monitoring, security measures, and cleanliness protocols, to ensure that the facilities are well-maintained and safe for all users. Additionally, we can collaborate with local law and council enforcement and community organisations to deter any anti-social behaviour in the vicinity.

By providing accessible and well-maintained public toilets, we not only meet a fundamental need but also contribute to a cleaner and more welcoming community environment. Let's work together to strike a balance between addressing concerns and fulfilling the essential needs of our residents and visitors. "

C: Gail Ramster, Senior Research Associate, The Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design, Royal College of Art

It is important to "to find out what the specific type of ASB is that they are concerned about (if there is one). Vandalism has very different route causes to drug use, for example. At the One Kilburn meeting, where they'd managed to get all sorts of services in the same room, the Police Community Support Officer described vandalism as people drawing attention to themselves whereas the more probable ASB was about hiding in the toilets (for drug use or simply shelter).

They also had representatives from the Drugs and Alcohol Service there, who spoke about using more supportive and inclusive language to get help to users rather than threatening, and to avoid confrontation. Both they and the police offered to provide training/guidance for the toilet staff.

The other insight from that was a Community Support officer offering to provide a presence near the toilets on a regular basis, but that for them, this is much easier weekdays, whereas weekends they've a skeleton service.

So, getting people in the room, figuring out the specific risks, mitigating against them, and understanding the reality of what support can be offered, will help build a plan.

It seems like a much harder situation which comes up a lot is where a toilet has already been closed because of criminal activity, and now the council want to reopen it. If a specific problem exists (such as prostitution and drug dealing, which was the case in Hackney), and there's no plan for how to stop it happening again, the police will be much more reluctant to support."