

## Health and Social Care Committee

HSC(4)-02-12 paper 1

### **Public health implications of inadequate public toilet facilities - Evidence from Louise Hughes, lead petitioner, P-03-292 Public Toilet Provision**

The following is a precis of my presentation to the Health & Social Care Committee on 19th January 2012.

Firstly, I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to express the views of the hundreds of people I have spoken to in the last three years on the rather indelicate subject of public toilet provision across Wales. Without wishing to offend the sensibilities of anyone present at the meeting I will be referring to bodily functions as "wee" and "poo" as this is how they were invariably said to me and, after all, they are terms with which we are all familiar.

I will begin by explaining why I have become so tenacious about this issue. Three years ago I saw an old lady of 83 on the High Street in Tywyn who was visibly distressed and as no-one was approaching her I asked her what was wrong and was there any way I could help. It turned out that she had wet herself because she couldn't make it to the toilet at the far end of the High Street in time and, in her words, she had "disgraced herself". Dorothy was utterly distraught and extremely embarrassed. I took her home and made her a cup of tea and reassured her that no-one she knew had seen her predicament. She felt she had lost all her dignity and was very upset - it took me quite a while to calm her down.

Can you imagine how she felt? An old lady of 83 suffering in a public place because of a lack of public toilets. This small incident sparked my anger at how financial cuts to public services are directly effecting the quality of life of the very people who pay for those public services. In Gwynedd the closure of dozens of public toilets across the county was to save the paltry sum of £133,000 - surely a drop in the ocean of funds available. I have since spoken with most of the other Local Authorities in Wales and the story is repeated in every area and with it much anguish is inflicted on countless hundreds of people every day.

This job of this committee is to examine the effects closing public toilets has on people, particularly the elderly who can feel disenfranchised from decisions made on their behalf and feel they have no way of getting their voices heard. It is also a subject which can cause embarrassment to the older generation as it is "private" and not something talked about in polite company. I, on the other hand, have no qualms whatsoever about discussing something which each and every one of us has no way avoiding and there is nothing to be coy about!

These are some of the many comments made to me during my campaign to raise the profile of lack of public toilet.

Winifred 80 "well I'm not as nimble on my feet as I used to be and since they closed the toilets in town I don't go out much anymore. I have friends come to visit me but days can go by when I don't see a soul and I get quite lonely. The boy from the shop delivers my groceries and I make him a cuppa if he has the time but that's about it really."

Alfred 76 "I don't drive anymore because my eyes are not so good and I rely on the bus. The trouble is if I need to "go" halfway through the journey I'm stuck aren't I? I'm on water pills and they make me want to pee all the time".

Enid (75) "I had to have a colostomy bag fitted for a while because of my cancer treatment and when the bag fills up it fills up so quickly you've got no time to get to the toilet if you're away from home. I was so scared of having an accident with it I didn't go out for months".

Bet (81) "Why are they closing the toilets anyway? – it doesn't make sense. It's not as if they have to build new ones is it? The world's gone mad – they spend so much money on stupid things but if you want to go to the loo when you're out and about, forget it".

Meirion (70) "I took good care of my health as a young man so I never expected to be like this now I'm older. My problem is my waterworks – I just can't "hold on" like I used to. I don't go out unless I know for certain there is a loo available – it's not too much to ask is it?".

Gwyneth (76) "It seems rude somehow to go into a cafe to use their toilet and not have anything to eat or drink and at my age I'm certainly not going into a pub on my own. I only go out once a month now when my daughter takes me into town".

Sulwyn (73) "Since they closed the toilets in the village people have been doing it round the back and it's disgusting there, the smell is awful and it's right by the bus stop".

All the comments above were made by real people but I have changed their names to protect their privacy. Sadly, Dorothy passed away last year.

What struck me most from the conversations I had was that almost all of the elderly folk had curtailed their lives in some way for fear of being "caught short" when they were away from home and some of them almost never or rarely went out at all. I'm sure all of us have experienced needing to go the toilet (particularly for a poo) and not being able to find one quickly enough. It is extremely distressing to say the least – you have stomach cramps, your heart rate goes up, you begin to sweat and you lose focus of anything other

than the need to get to a toilet. This distress is magnified tenfold if you have a medical condition or are on medication. According to the British Heart Foundation holding onto a full bladder causes your heart to beat faster and puts added strain on coronary arteries, triggering them to contract, which could lead to a heart attack or stroke, particularly in the elderly. We have an ageing population which brings this debate into sharp focus – we talk about dignity for the elderly but that's all we do ... talk.

With so many of our older citizens feeling trapped in their homes because of a lack of public toilets is that treating them with dignity and respect? Loneliness and social isolation is a potential killer for elderly people on their own for days, sometimes weeks on end and can lead to a downward spiral in physical health resulting in death. In a civilised society we have a duty of care to our elderly folk to enable them to live independent and fulfilling lives for as long as they are able and, in my opinion, a part of that responsibility is the provision of public toilets which were originally built because there was a need and that need still exists today. Perhaps more so because of the hundreds of thousands of visitors to our beautiful country every year.

I acknowledge that these are financially difficult times and that cuts have to be made. As public toilets are a non-statutory provision it is easy to make the decision to close them to save money but closing toilets does not stop people needing to use them. There have been many reported incidents in my area where people have "gone" behind closed toilet blocks which must surely be a health hazard.

I am happy to take any questions from the Committee but I would like to take the liberty of asking one of my own. So, we close public toilets ..... and then what?

Louise Hughes  
County Councillor