

WHERE CAN I GO? CAMPAIGN *by Gillian Kemp*

The row of black cabs outside a London station is such a welcoming sight to those of us weighted down by luggage or are just emerging from the theatre in the pouring rain, but I doubt whether many of the passengers ever considers where the drivers go if they wish to use the loo! The problem for any of us driving out and about is finding a loo when we need one and it is even more difficult in London where parking is an issue and public toilets are few and very far between. Even if we do find one the questions that come to mind are probably: Will it be clean? Well maintained? Is it in a safe environment? Can I park?

Very often the answers are no, no, no, and no.

PUBLIC TOILETS ARE IMPORTANT TO EVERYONE

One of the major problems is that Local authorities have the power to provide public toilets but the Public Health Act of 1936 imposes no duty for them to do so. In October 2008, the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee published a report entitled 'The Provision of Public Toilets'. In its introduction the report recognises that public toilets are important to everyone but, in spite of the oral and written evidence provided to the Committee by individuals and representatives of various organisations, the Committee decided not to make the implementation of public toilet facilities a statutory duty. Neither did the Committee wish to impose a duty on local authorities to provide a public toilet strategy! And to make matters worse there is currently no requirement for public toilets to be included in town plans, urban policy documents, or urban regeneration policy. This means it is very easy for the powers that be to push the need for public toilet facilities to the bottom of the filing drawer regardless of the clamour of the few of us who stamp our feet in frustration and cross our legs in anguish.

Unfortunately the attitude of local authorities – and others in positions of power - towards toilets ranges from contempt, embarrassed giggles and smutty jokes. Apart from a few enlightened companies and local authorities – and there are some, as the annual Loo of the Year Award Ceremony demonstrates - the work of the people who clean and maintain public toilets is not considered important to the health and wellbeing of the community. Yet research suggests that the provision of clean toilets would undoubtedly reduce the amount of money spent by the NHS on urological and incontinence services because the transmission of unpleasant bacteria and viruses would be reduced.

To many local authorities toilets are viewed as a problem. Crime, vandalism, cottaging and drugs are used as reasons for closure with the result that the mindless minority once again ensure that the majority of us, who use them for their proper purpose, are inconvenienced. There are, however, ways around these issues and a document entitled 'Public Conveniences: Problem Reduction Guide' originally authored by Staffordshire Police is currently being updated by Hertfordshire Constabulary. The resulting publication will be available to local authorities, architects, planners and others with responsibility for and an interest in public toilets. Education is the key.

MEDICAL CONDITIONS

In the meantime the lack of toilet provision aggravates a range of medical issues. 'Holding on' - which must be common practice amongst taxi drivers in the current situation - is not good for the bladder and studies show that urinary tract infections, problems of distended bladders and other urinary and gynaecological problems have increased in relation to further toilet closures. People with bowel problems, or the occasional tummy upset, suffer a great deal of anxiety and have to plan their journeys because of the lack of toilets. Reducing one's fluid intake is not the answer because it can lead to dehydration.

In desperation, I know that people, particularly men, urinate – and defecate – in places other than a toilet. Women do too, but it's not so easy for them. Laws against



public urination generally relate to public decency and the male population rather than issues related to hygiene – and the convenience of women is not given consideration. However in spite of the health and environmental issues which we read about in various newspaper articles from time to time, the toilet cull continues.

There are two forms of public toilet provision. Firstly on street toilets which are provided – or not – by the local authority and secondly, private off street toilets which are provided by a developer, the owner of a shopping centre or other private building. Under current legislation, private developers have no legal obligation to provide toilets for shoppers but they have recognised that it is in the interest of shopping centres and malls to provide toilet facilities. Popping into a pub may appear to be a solution, but those with particular religious beliefs, many women and those with children don't consider this to be acceptable. Automatic toilets are not popular for various reasons but fulfil a need for the desperate.

In some areas there is a Community Partnership Scheme where companies are supported by their local authority to allow the public to use their toilets without making a purchase. Boris Johnson launched the London scheme in March 2009. The local authority usually pays the company around an annual fee for this service and the company places a sticker in its window. However this scheme should not be a way for local authorities to opt out of providing public toilet facilities – but for the general public, and taxi drivers - it could be considered better than nothing. However because it involves businesses and shops it does not suit the mobile worker such as black cab drivers who work outside normal business hours.

The trouble, particularly for taxi drivers, is that public toilet provision varies greatly from area to area. Toilets are needed at all sorts of locations and they need to have appropriate signage and be available on maps or sat navs. Opening hours and the location of the nearest open toilet should also be clearly advertised. For people who are constantly on the move like taxi drivers and for those who do not work usual office hours finding a toilet is a worry. So, Where Can I Go?

NEW CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED

On 16 September this year the British Toilet Association (yes, it really exists!) launched a campaign Where Can I Go? The BTA acts an important link between the private sector toilet producers, local authority providers, local authority policy makers and planners and voluntary campaign groups representing users. Originally the BTA went directly to MPs and Government but it was agreed by BTA members that the best way of changing attitudes is for everyone to work together under the BTA umbrella. So, the focus of the Where Can I Go? campaign is to use

People Power – people in the community in their various organisations, such as cab drivers - to direct the approach primarily at local government .

The campaign targets are:

- * All local authorities who fail to provide adequate public toilet facilities
- * All local authorities without a Public Toilet Provision Strategy
- * Commercial publicly accessible toilet providers who fail to provide adequate facilities for their customers and other users
- * The media

The success of the campaign, which will be monitored by the BTA, will include toilet facilities for all, better environments, reduced health risks and total cost savings set against the provider inactivity.

What can you do?

- * Act as a group and establish your own taxi drivers' campaign.
- * As a group: write to the local press, contact local councillors, hoteliers (especially those hotels whose toilets are used by taxi drivers) and invite them to meet you to discuss the situation – point out that the lack of toilets not only affects you and your health, but is also detrimental to the vital tourist trade. People tend to remember a place by its toilets!
- * Inform as many people as possible of the campaign
- * Pledge your support by visiting the BTA website www.britloos.co.uk
- * And don't hesitate to contact me at gillian.kemp@ntlworld.com if you think I can help further.

Good luck! And do keep me updated on your progress.



TAXI DRIVING TEST FEES – INCREASE IN VAT

The Driver Standards Agency (DSA), which is contracted to carry out taxi driving assessments on behalf of Transport for London, has advised that its fees changed on 1 January 2010 to reflect the increase in VAT to 17.5%.

The new fees are:

NORMAL HOURS (Monday to Friday 09:00-17:00):

Taxi driving test and wheelchair test £91.00

Wheelchair test only £26.00

SATURDAY AND EVENINGS:

Taxi driving test and wheelchair test £110.00

Wheelchair test only £31.99

Further information in respect of the DSA taxi driving test, including the online booking service can be found at www.dsa.gov.uk.