

## “Nowhere to Go”

### Improving access to toilets for people with disabilities in Northumberland

Interim Report, August 2017

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<https://action.crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/ea-action/action?ea.client.id=1995&ea.campaign.id=54733>

## The Project

“Nowhere to Go” aims to promote social justice by improving access to appropriate public toilet facilities in Northumberland for disabled people and their carers. The project is managed by Newcastle University and Carers Northumberland, who are working in collaboration with people with disabilities and their carers.

We aim to:

- identify the issues faced by disabled people and their carers accessing appropriate toilets
- build cross-sector partnerships
- examine potential solutions
- develop funding applications to implement proposed solutions

### What we have done so far

We have held interviews with representatives from:

Northumberland Council, Adapt North East, In It Together, Disability North, Age UK Northumberland, Alzheimer’s Northumberland, and WECAN.

We asked questions focussing on three broad areas:

- What are the issues raised by service users?
- What might make a difference?
- How can we best engage directly with service users to understand the issues and make a difference?

### Main Findings

#### *1. Lack of appropriate toilet facilities*

There are not enough toilets, nor are there enough accessible toilets.

#### *2. Lack of “Changing Places” toilets*

A lack of “Changing Places” toilets is a particular issue as other toilets designated as “accessible” often do not have the space or equipment needed to change young people and adults. As a result, carers have to “make do”: changing people on floors in frequently unclean surroundings (see below). Although “Changing Places” toilets have a website that maps the location of the toilets, interviews highlighted a lack of knowledge.

### *3. Quality and cleanliness*

Many of the accessible toilet facilities are unclean, with floor areas being particularly dirty. People with additional needs and carers often bring changing mats and wipes to improve hygiene.

### *4. Signage, standardisation and planning*

Toilets are not well signposted at street level, nor within buildings. Signs are often too small, in the wrong place, or not there. Signs enabling safe departure from toilets are sparse. Standardised signs are easier for people to understand. The variation in tap designs, noise from hand driers and white toilet seats are all problematic for some people. There is insufficient attention to accessibility at the design and planning stages.

### *5. Stigma and embarrassment*

Discussing additional needs around toileting (and especially incontinence) is still for some a taboo subject. People experience embarrassment or discomfort if they have to explain a sudden “need to go” or have to ask for a key to the toilet and some avoid using any public toilet.

### *6. Who are accessible toilets for?*

The difference between “disabled” and “accessible” toilet is not always clear. People with unseen disabilities using accessible facilities can face disapproving looks or comments. This is linked to a general lack of understanding around the multiplicity of additional needs experienced by different groups.

### *7. Lack of information on availability*

People struggle to know where accessible facilities are – often using word of mouth and sticking to familiar places. There is little knowledge of Northumberland’s “You’re Welcome” community toilet scheme, which sees local businesses opening up their toilet facilities to the public.

### *8. Incontinence*

Incontinence is an increasing problem in an ageing population. Northumberland has a higher proportion of older people than other areas in the North East. Problems accessing appropriate toilet facilities can lead to older people and their carers avoiding going out and can risk increased social exclusion and loneliness. Incontinence can be the tipping point for care admissions with people no longer able to live at home.

## Making a Difference

Possible solutions included:

- An awareness raising campaign and work with schools/young people – *to reduce stigma*
- Providing easy access to information through maps, apps and websites - *to reduce isolation*
- Involving Tourist Information Centres and local businesses – *to provide more facilities and raise awareness*
- Influencing planners/architects to prioritise accessibility of new builds – *to increase appropriate provision and plan signage*
- Campaigning to increase the number of Changing Places toilets – *to increase provision and improve lives*
- Having incontinence pads available to buy in toilets – *to break down taboos*

## Project Engagement with Service Users

Suggestions included:

- Attending service user forums/meetings
- Emailing out questions/information to existing service user networks
- Posting on social media via relevant organisations
- Working with a group of service users to film visits to existing facilities to highlight the issues

## The Next Steps

The next stage is a workshop on **Sept 8<sup>th</sup>, 9.30am-12.30pm at Northumberland CVA, Ashington** – full details and agenda to follow. At the workshop we hope that solutions will be discussed, and narrowed down to agreed practical next steps, which will include engagement with service users.

We are also interested in hearing suggestions of other groups or people we should include or speak to.



(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/disability-37896012>)