



Nowhere to 'go':

Promoting social justice by improving access to appropriate public toilet facilities for people with disabilities in Northumberland

Pilot study report

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With thanks to Carers Northumberland, who organised and promoted the focus groups, and Prof. Derek Bell, project supervisor.

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1. Introduction

This report discusses the findings of a small pilot that looked into the provision of public toilets in Northumberland. The study was intended to gain information about the challenges disabled people and their carers face in relation to accessing toilets when out and about in Northumberland, and to form an understanding of what new initiatives might improve the situation.

The main part of the study took the form of three focus groups conducted with carers in different locations within Northumberland: Ponteland (26/10/16), Alnwick (01/11/16) and Morpeth (03/11/16). The sessions were organised and promoted by Carers Northumberland. Turnout at the focus groups was not particularly high, which is understandable given the large commitments that people who care already have. Ponteland and Morpeth might better be described as paired depth interviews. Nonetheless, the quantity and quality of the information received in these sessions was very rich, and made up a strong basis for further research moving forward from this pilot study. Throughout this report, direct quotations from focus group participants will be presented in blue, separate from the main text.

One key issue that the study served to highlight was the vital importance of having access to quality public toilets that are easy to locate. Participants discussed situations where they or someone they know had found themselves 'caught short' and in urgent need of a toilet, but were unable to find one. Individual circumstances, such as taking certain medicines that increase the need to use the toilet, mean that this issue affects some members of society more than others. Making matters worse, the stigma which makes toilets a taboo subject means that asking strangers for directions to toilets or asking local business owners to use their toilets can make people feel embarrassed. It was even remarked that some people would rather have accidents than mention toilets to a stranger.

'I think some of our users would rather have an accident rather than ask somebody'

It was also found that even when toilets have been found, there often is not enough of them. This issue is likely to be familiar to women, whose toilets often have large queues. There also tends to be only one accessible toilet in any public toilet site, meaning that disabled people are more likely to have to wait before being able to use the facilities they need.

The study not only draws attention to the difficulty in finding toilets, however. In fact, much of the information gained related to the conditions of toilets themselves. It was discovered that certain design features could make the difference between a disastrous toilet and a decent one. Also, atmosphere counts. It is of vital importance that people feel safe when using toilets, particularly those who might have social anxieties. Usually, people just want to be anonymous when visiting the toilet; any arrangement that draws attention is undesirable. It is therefore important to note that a toilet somewhere intimidating is often as bad as no toilet at all.

This report presents core findings of the pilot study. The next section seeks to provide some background of the public toilet landscape in the UK and Northumberland. Section 3 then looks at some of the issues surrounding public toilets that have been discovered over the course of

this study. Section 4 explores the advantages and drawbacks of initiatives found across the UK, called Community Toilet Schemes. Sections 5, 6 and 7 will focus on issues people have when trying to find toilets, looking at existing strategies focus group participants use, and discussing the potential usefulness of signs or technological solutions. The remaining sections 8 and 9 will finally look at the sorts of locations which participants identified as suitable places to use the toilet, then what design features are 'dos' and 'don'ts' for public toilets.

2. Background

'Public toilet provision has become increasingly unsatisfactory, because of closure of existing facilities and a general neglect and marginalisation of toilet issues by urban policy makers ... Not only is there a lack of facilities, those that are provided are often sub-standard. The toilet problem is heightened because of bad design, poor maintenance and management of existing facilities, and lack of toilet attendants. These factors result in unsanitary facilities, anti-social behaviour, and an unsuccessful battle against the problems of crime and vandalism that so beset public toilets.'¹

The issue of public toilets is often overlooked as a key public service and facilities remain woefully inadequate for the UK population. In particular, provisions for women, children, the elderly and disabled are lacking.

In the early twentieth century, public toilets continued to be built in large cities and by many provincial municipal local authorities. There appeared to be no question that provision was necessary. Although the majority of these facilities were specifically aimed at the needs of the main breadwinner (i.e. men), pre-war facilities also included some buildings purpose-built for women and young children. From the late 1970s onwards government cuts led to fewer new facilities being built, many more being closed, and charges for use becoming more common as a way to save money.²

Smith³ argues that older people, children, women, disabled/ill and homeless people are those most in need of public toilet provision and he posits a number of reasons for the huge decline in public toilets over the last 20 years: cost, less perceived need due to more toilets available in homes and public buildings, inability to convert to wheelchair use (in some cases the location was inappropriate, in others the site was too valuable), vandalism and inappropriate use (drugs, etc.). But the main reason is cost.

In 2015, Northumberland County Council referred to 'the need to make savings following the budget cuts by central Government' in a review of public toilets.⁴ This review announced the closure of many public toilets, as well as the restriction of opening hours for others. As of this review, the council was hopeful that their community toilet scheme would effectively compensate for cost-cutting measures (see pages 8-9 for more about community toilet schemes).

¹ Clara Greed, *Inclusive Urban Design: Public Toilets* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 2003).

² Ibid.

³ R. Stanwell Smith, 'Public toilets down the drain? Why privies are a public health concern', *Public Health*, 124 (2010).

⁴ Northumberland County Council, 'Council remains committed to public toilets following review' (14 September 2015) (<http://www.northumberland.gov.uk/News/2015/Sep/Council-remains-committed-to-public-toilets-follow.aspx>). [Accessed 1 May 2017].

3. What are the issues?

This section aims to highlight some of the reasons why the current landscape of public toilets is inadequate. Drawing from the findings of the researchers' preliminary studies as well as insights from the focus groups, below are some of the key issues people confront when it comes to public toilets. These issues could provide interesting starting points for any further research stemming from this pilot study.

- **Lack of accessible/enhanced facilities**

A key concern of this study, facilities for those with additional needs are vital. Even an everyday trip to the shops can be extremely problematic for some. A survey by the Audit Commission in 1999 showed that the total number of accessible facilities in Wales or Scotland was approximately the same as the number located in the London area alone.⁵ While facilities for those with a disability or additional needs may have improved over the last century, the number of available toilets for those who may need it the most are woefully inadequate, particularly in more rural areas. Focus group findings confirmed this, with insufficient provision being raised as a big problem for disabled people and their carers.

- **Shortage of female toilets**

As the long queues frequently seen outside women's toilets suggest, availability of female toilets is insufficient. It has even been calculated that women require a 2:1 ratio of female-male toilets to have parity with men.⁶

- **Discomfort caused by unisex toilets**

Focus group participants voiced concern about the fact that accessible toilets tend to be unisex, and that it is uncomfortable for some women to use toilets that unknown men have also used. Another participant said she would be uncomfortable using a toilet in a predominantly male environment, like a pub or bookmaker, which should be remembered if trying to implement a community toilet scheme (discussed in the next section).

- **Uncleanliness**

Many participants commented on unclean, poorly equipped public facilities. The researchers also experienced evidence of this during site visits. Differentiating between these unsuitable toilets and acceptable toilets will be an important part of improving public toilet facilities.

- **Locked accessible toilets**

Many accessible toilets now use the RADAR key system as a way to provide public accessible toilets while avoiding common issues of vandalism and misuse. Each toilet is fitted with a standard lock opened by a RADAR key. The NKS aims to give independent access to disabled patrons and have encouraged over 400 local authorities as well as individual organisations such as shopping centres, restaurants and parks, to join the scheme.⁷ However, for those needing access to these toilets,

⁵ Clara Greed, *Inclusive Urban Design: Public Toilets* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 2003).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Changing Places, 'Key Schemes' (n.d.) (http://www.changing-places.org/install_a_toilet/equipment/key_schemes.aspx) [Accessed 1 May 2017].

finding where they are located can often be a challenge as maps and lists are out of date or difficult to find, and there is also a cost in buying the key and handbook. The Radar Key scheme was used by a number of participants and meant being able to gain access to many locked accessible toilets without having to ask an attendant. However, some organisations do not use the scheme and operate their own locking procedures which mean anyone needing access has to get a key from an attendant. One participant pointed out that there have been occasions where this has been denied on the basis that the person did not have a physical disability/required the use of a wheelchair.

- **Lack of 'Changing Places' toilets**

These public toilets offer a wide range of extra equipment for those who need them, as well as a large space.⁸ Unfortunately, there are none of these excellent toilets in Northumberland. Focus group participants had not heard of these facilities, but thought they would make a big difference to many people with a variety of support needs.

- **'Disabled' or 'accessible'?**

A particularly contentious issue in the focus groups was whether accessible toilets can be used by anyone. Some pointed out that not all disabilities are visible, and that nobody should be judged for using them. Others reported frustration when recalling occasions when they had witnessed people exiting accessible toilets whom they believed did not require the facilities. The fact that a wheelchair symbol is often used to denote accessible toilets fuels this confusion.

'It's not a disabled loo, it's an accessible loo ... You know disabled car parking space? They are only for people who've got disabilities, a blue badge. But toilets aren't like that: it's not the same.'

This list is by no means an exhaustive account of all the issues surrounding public toilets. The coming pages hope to shed further light on the situation.

⁸ Changing Places, 'What are Changing Places Toilets?' (n.d.) (http://www.changing-places.org/the_campaign/what_are_changing_places_toilets.aspx) [Accessed 1 May 2017].

4. Community toilet schemes

In order to address the shortage of public toilets, initiatives known as community toilet schemes have emerged throughout the UK. These programmes, usually organised by local authorities, make agreements with private businesses to make their toilets available to members of the public. Crucially, those who use these community toilets must be under no obligation to make any purchases in exchange for using the facilities. Focus group participants told stories of times when they attempted to use toilets in privately owned businesses but were turned down, so on this basis these schemes are commendable.

'They're not nice when they refuse you, either'

Notable council-implemented schemes within an approximate 200-mile radius of Northumberland have included projects in Eden⁹, Ribble Valley¹⁰, South Ayrshire¹¹, as well as larger city authorities. A look at the online resources about these schemes indicates a low level of businesses uptake. Northumberland also has its own 'You're Welcome' scheme, with 18 participating businesses (though the scheme does not run for the entire year in some of these locations).¹²

Recruiting businesses to take part is one of biggest challenges when setting up a community toilet scheme. To respond to this, some local authorities have offered incentives. For instance, Sheffield offers three free graffiti removals per year, while others offer annual payments. These are likely to be attempts to compensate for the negative outcomes of allowing members of the public to freely use the toilets, rather than simple rewards.

'Well, it might be the difference between somebody coming in and buying a cup of coffee in your café. You know, you might go to the loo and think, "Oh, I'll just stay here and have a cup of coffee".'

Another benefit business-owners stand to gain from agreeing to take part in a community toilet scheme is added footfall, which may lead to more purchases by people who initially only intended to use the toilet. Also, businesses may gain benefits in terms of community-standing for offering free use of facilities.

Northumberland County Council does not consistently offer direct incentives for businesses to join their 'You're Welcome' scheme. This may go towards explaining the low uptake by businesses, which at 18 toilets is not a lot for a county as large as Northumberland. Promotion is another issue facing the 'You're Welcome' scheme. As well as a page on their website providing details about the scheme, participating businesses should display small stickers provided by the council on their windows. However, site visits to several of the businesses listed on the web-page found no

⁹ Eden District Council, 'Toilets and community toilet scheme' (n.d.) (<https://www.eden.gov.uk/your-environment/street-care-and-cleaning/toilets-and-community-toilet-scheme/>) [Accessed 1 May 2017].

¹⁰ Ribble Valley Borough Council, 'Ribble Valley Community Toilet Scheme' (n.d.) (https://www.ribblevalley.gov.uk/info/200289/people_and_communities/1381/ribble_valley_community_toilet_scheme) [Accessed 1 May 2017].

¹¹ South Ayrshire Council, 'Comfort Scheme' (n.d.) (<http://www.south-ayrshire.gov.uk/bins-and-recycling/comfortscheme.aspx>) [Accessed 1 May 2017].

¹² Northumberland County Council, 'Use our loo!' (n.d.) (<http://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Campaigns/Use-our-loo.aspx>) [Accessed 1 May 2017].

evidence of these stickers being displayed. Moreover, the experience of focus group participants and the researchers was that the Northumberland council website is generally difficult to navigate. When focus groups were asked whether they were aware of the 'You're Welcome' scheme, most participants were unfamiliar. The most positive response received was from a participant who had a vague recollection of hearing about the scheme, but did not know any details.

Discussions that took place in the focus groups provided lots of information about how a community toilet scheme would need to be designed to fulfil the needs of disabled people

and their carers. Firstly, people would need to be educated on how such schemes work, and what to look out for when searching for a community toilet. This might involve simply creating and distributing leaflets, or more complex work such as collaborating with local third sector groups to promote schemes. Signs would need to be carefully designed (see page 11), and careful use of technology might

help by showing people where community toilets are located (see pages 12-13). Care would have to be taken to ensure that it was clear what accessible facilities different community toilets would offer; information which is not usually available on existing community toilet websites.

Some participants even had suggestions on how business-owners could be engaged with the project, such as through organised business-owner forums in which their concerns could be heard and taken into account when planning any scheme. Other suggestions included charity boxes outside community toilets, and 'best community toilet' award ceremonies.

5. Getting by: strategies used to find toilets

This section discusses the existing strategies used by participants to manage outings with provision of public toilets as it currently stands. In cases when the visit was somewhere the participant had been before, generally it was reported that

'I can tell you between here and home how many loos there are'

people used 'mental maps', which are based on memory of previous visits. For places that were unfamiliar, different strategies were necessary. Any scheme or solution that hopes to improve toilet accessibility would do well to take note of

these existing strategies, as users will be able to adapt to new arrangements best if they tie in with their usual behaviours. Below are the strategies identified:

- **Advance site visits**

One strategy that arose was the carer actually visiting a location and identifying the whereabouts of toilet facilities prior to taking the person they care for on a visit. This should serve to highlight the scale of the problem of lack of information, as it is unfortunate that such a time consuming task should be necessary.

- **Ringing ahead**

This was identified as a useful strategy in cases where you know where you are going in advance, such as when staying at a hotel. Information gathered on the phone should be treated with caution, however, as 'accessible' can mean different things to different people, and without visual reference it can be difficult to know whether facilities described are in fact suitable for a specific case.

- **Google**

This search engine was occasionally raised as a useful resource for finding information about toilet availability. However, online resources must not be treated as a 'one size fits all' solution; some participants mentioned needing help from family when browsing the web, and others said that the internet does not appeal at all to them or those they care for (see page 13).

'Yes, Google, with the help from others in the family.'

- **Looking out for signs**

Many participants had come to identify certain signs – particularly supermarket signs – with suitable toilet facilities. This indicates that there is a lot of potential in using signage as a way of making toilets easier to locate. Participants stressed that signs should be as large and clear as possible, with simple graphics and unambiguous language.

6. Signs: the way forward?

A lot of our findings in the focus groups suggested that improving the visibility of signs that help users to locate free-to-use toilets would make outings a great deal easier. However, many signs currently in use – including the Northumberland ‘You’re Welcome’ sticker – were deemed too small to be of much use. Size was not the only pitfall of signs either: unclear language and symbols were also raised as problematic. The list below seeks to remedy such problems by highlighting what constitutes good sign practice:

- **Large size**

The larger the sign, the more likely it is that people are going to spot it! A3 size signs were identified as ideal. One participant added that another benefit of a large sign is that it will make people feel more confident that they are welcome.

- **Simple graphics**

Graphics and symbols are a good way to communicate information quickly and draw attention, particularly if the sign is located on a roadside when people are going to be passing it at speed. However, unconventional graphic designs can be as confusing as they are eye-catching. Instead, simple, intuitive symbols denoting things like ‘male’, ‘female’ or ‘accessible’ are desirable. Again, the larger the symbol the better.

‘It’s amazing how often you drive into somewhere and there’s no hint at all where the toilets are on the signage’

- **Clear language**

Use of words that would not necessarily be recognisable to all users, such as ‘loo’, is unhelpful. One participant thought this was a dated word. Any writing on signs should be unambiguous and jargon-free.

‘Really do the simplest thing you can possibly imagine, then it’ll be all-inclusive’

7. Toilets: there's an app for that?

A key goal of this study was to get a sense of whether information technology (IT) could form part of the solution to the problems encountered when searching for appropriate toilets. In particular, the idea that a mobile phone application ('app') that maps out toilets in Northumberland was considered. When discussing the idea of a 'toilet-mapper' with focus group participants, the discussions highlighted that the more detail provided the better. Ideally, size dimensions and accessibility features should be included, and photographs or even a 3D tour of the toilets would be extra useful.

'If the app had actually a visual of the toilet, so for example you could look in advance'

Previous projects have attempted to use the internet to make toilets easier to locate. A prominent example of this is the Great British Public Toilet Map, a website that allows users to plot public toilets on an online map, which can then be viewed by others. Site visits to Blyth, Morpeth, Alnwick, Alnmouth and Warkworth found limitations to this resource. The fact that anyone can input toilets on the map means that some important information (opening times, accessibility, RADAR key requirement, etc.) about the toilets is missing or inaccurate, while other toilets simply do not exist in the location plotted. These issues have potential to cause serious problems for users, and would need to be remedied in any future IT solutions. Also, the Great British Public Toilet Map is only accessible via a PC web browser, making it of limited use when on the move. When asked about this website, no focus group participants had heard of it, so promotion and visibility may be another issue.

Council websites were also investigated. Northumberland County Council's website features a map onto which members of their 'You're Welcome' scheme are plotted. This is not integrated with existing public toilets, nor is it accessible on portable devices. Additionally, both the researchers and focus group participants reported difficulty in navigating the council website, and distrust that its content is up-to-date.

The issue of keeping content up-to-date is important to consider when thinking about the use of IT to make toilets easier to find. Details can often change: toilets can be closed, or businesses in community toilet schemes could change their minds about making their facilities available. Leaving an app available to the public without a system whereby it can be updated regularly could spread misinformation and cause difficulties to anyone relying on the accuracy of the source. Therefore, any project with a finite timescale must be cautious when pursuing an IT solution.

Nonetheless, input from the focus groups did suggest that there is potential in using IT. One carer reported proficiency when using technology, while another reported that the person

'I was gonna say, in this metropolis we call Ponteland, GPRS is all we've got ... No 3G or 4G here in Ponteland'

they care for was a confident mobile phone user. Technology is not accessible to all, however; focus group participants warned that it would not always be a suitable solution for people who have learning difficulties or dementia, and online security would be another concern for carers. People who are simply unfamiliar with technology, and do not know anyone who is, would not benefit from something like an app. On mobile devices, access to the internet is not consistent across all locations,

either, which could adversely affect people visiting rural areas like those found in Northumberland. The use of IT must accordingly not be seen as a universal solution to the issues, though it equally need not be ruled out as a possible component of a larger scheme.

8. Where to 'go'?

Participants were encouraged to share ideas about the types of premises that they would consider particularly helpful – or unhelpful – to use for the toilet. This information will be invaluable for anyone considering which businesses would be appropriate to recruit for a community toilet scheme. Below are the key the locations highlighted as good locations to use the toilet:

- **Chemists**

With their medical atmosphere and trustworthy staff, chemists were raised as a place where users could feel safe and secure using the toilet. It was also pointed out that, when waiting for a prescription, you can often find yourself spending more time in a chemist than you might have expected, increasing the likelihood of being 'caught short'. Further research may be useful in identifying whether chemists tend to have toilet facilities at present.

'I think a chemist is sort of like a doctor's, so I think people automatically think it's a safer place'

- **Supermarkets/large shops**

Complete with large, recognisable signs, these locations are easy to spot and can be relied on to have decent toilet facilities. Also, the size of supermarkets mean that individuals can use their toilets with a sense of anonymity, reducing the embarrassment that might come with popping into a smaller venue to use the facilities.

- **Bus/train stations and car parks**

As places where journeys are started and finished, these spots were brought up by participants as highly useful toilet locations.

The following are locations that could be useful, but will not be suitable for all users and must be treated with caution:

- **Pubs**

Larger chain ones where a user could go in and out without drawing attention could be very useful for some users. However, the atmosphere of pubs could cause understandable unease, particularly smaller pubs where a visitor is likely to draw attention. Also, some users with learning difficulties or dementia could get confused if going into a pub and not having a drink.

- **Cafés**

Cafés are a good source of toilets, but can be quite small. This means that the chance of being able to pop in to use the toilet without drawing attention is less likely, and this could cause embarrassment for some people.

9. Toilet design: dos and don'ts

Participants had a wealth of experience of toilets, good and bad. This section seeks to outline the design features that are either helpful or unhelpful when using public toilet facilities. Firstly, below are the design features that were highlighted as positive attributes. Toilets that include these features should be considered prime candidates for community toilet schemes.

- **Wide door frames**

This enables ease-of-access for people in wheelchairs or who use other equipment to assist with mobility.

- **Space to move**

The more spacious a toilet, the better. Participants reported finding toilets too claustrophobic. For people carrying equipment or using wheelchairs, this is doubly problematic.

'Blimey, they can be quite tight, toilets'

- **Baby changing**

Sometimes, baby changing facilities are not included within accessible toilets. This causes problems for parents who have difficulty using non-accessible spaces but need to tend to their babies.

'I'm not big but as I get older I find I can't turn round in a lot of the loos or toilets'

- **Sliding doors**

Doors that open inwards or outwards can be awkward for people with mobility issues or equipment. Sliding doors offer a good solution to this problem.

- **Attendant present**

While not a 'design' feature exactly, participants did identify the presence of attendants as a desirable feature of public toilets. An attendant being present was felt to increase the likelihood that the toilet is cleaned frequently, and can offer help if an issue arises. There is the issue of attendant gender, however; male attendants could cause female users unease.

The list below identifies toilet design features that are problematic:

- **Inward opening doors**

Doors that open inwards are difficult to close once the user is inside the cubicle. This is an uncomfortable situation to be in and impossible for people carrying equipment.

- **Elaborate taps**

There is an increasing trend of taps that are activated in elaborate ways, particularly through use of remote sensors that are difficult to locate. While these may seem classy, they can cause a great deal of confusion and prevent people from being able to wash their hands. Simple rotating taps are more desirable, with red and blue labels to make it easy to identify which tap is hot or cold.

- **Multiple mirrors**

Some public toilets feature a lot of mirrors, sometimes behind a ring of sinks in the centre of the room. For some users, such as people with learning difficulties or dementia, this could cause confusion and make finding the exits difficult. It is therefore important that mirrors are placed sensibly and in moderation.

- **Turnstile entry**

These awkwardly shaped barriers are designed to prevent people entering a public toilet until they have entered money into a slot. The biggest problem with this is that they are entirely insensitive to the needs of people in wheelchairs. The way that turnstiles require the user to edge through the gap once they have entered the money means that people carry equipment or have other mobility difficulties are also likely to have problems getting past. Further, the demand for money to gain entry prevents people from accessing a vital resource unless they have the cash to hand, regardless of how urgent the need to use the toilet is.

Appendix: Participant information sheet

Copies of this information sheet were provided to all participants of the focus groups.



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Participant Information Sheet: Research into the Availability of Public/Community Toilets in Northumberland

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this focus group. This information sheet is designed to help you understand more about what the research involves, and about what to expect from the focus groups. This sheet also includes details which may be useful after taking part in a session, so it is a good idea to keep hold of it.

The plan for this research was reviewed by an internal body in Newcastle University, and the researchers were provided with ethical approval on 19th October 2016. This research will be funded by the Politics department of Newcastle University.

Who are the researchers?

The focus group is being run by students who are attending Newcastle University, under the supervision of Prof Derek Bell. If you wish to contact either the students or their supervisor, please use the details below.

<u>Researcher details</u>	<u>Supervisor details</u>
Libby Morrison Human Geography Postgraduate Email: e.a.k.morrison@newcastle.ac.uk	Prof Derek Bell Politics 40-42 Great North Road Newcastle University Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU <i>Or email: derek.bell@newcastle.ac.uk</i>
Andrew McKenna Politics Undergraduate Email: a.f.mckenna2@newcastle.ac.uk	

Aims of the research

The aims of the project are:

- (1) to investigate in detail the issues disabled people and their carers in Northumberland face when accessing toilets when out and about;
- (2) to explore the extent to which a community toilet scheme (involving private businesses making their toilets available without requiring a purchase) would ease the difficulties faced when accessing toilets;
- (3) to research the potential utility of creating a mobile application that maps local public and community toilets in the county of Northumberland for the benefit of disabled people and their carers;
- (4) form the basis of further research, such as a survey, based on insights from the focus groups.

How does this research work?

We will be holding a number of group discussions ('focus groups') involving participants who attend support groups run by Carers Northumberland. Each focus group will take about an hour and a half (90 minutes) and there will be a total of 3 groups. We will be in contact with Carers Northumberland to make sure that advice or special requirements for the individuals who are participating in the study will be met.

What will the outcomes of this research be?

By carrying out this research, we will gain a clearer understanding of what practical solutions would make outings into Northumberland easier for disabled people and their carers. This could lead to further projects designed to action the solutions identified in this research, such as the development of a community toilet scheme and/or a mobile toilet-mapper application ('app'). The information could also be of use to Carers Northumberland and VoiCeS Northumberland when applying for future funding.

What to expect on the day

The researchers will begin by asking the whole group some questions about their experiences accessing public toilets, and this conversation will be audio recorded using a small electronic device. Participants will then be invited to take part in another activity as part of a small group or individually - this will not be audio recorded but any notes or doodles will be used by the researchers. After a comfort break, all participants will take part in a final full group discussion, which will again be audio recorded. We will try to ensure that everyone present is given an equal opportunity to contribute to the discussions.

We will aim to keep the session within ninety minutes, plus a 10 minute comfort break, and refreshments will be provided. However, participants are welcome to take a break or leave the session at any time, without providing a reason.

We will aim to make the sessions as relaxed and comfortable as possible. There will be opportunities at the end of the session for feedback, and to talk to the support worker present if required.

What will happen to the information collected?

During the focus groups, any information collected on paper will be taken for use by the researchers, and an audio recording device will be used to record discussions of the whole group.

The focus groups are confidential, which means that the researchers will make sure that participants' identities are not known to anyone who was not present at the focus group. The following measures will be taken to ensure confidentiality:

- Only the researchers will have access to the information collected, including audio recordings.
- Names of individuals will not be identifiable or used in the audio transcription (a written script of the audio recorded during the focus group), final reports or research documents.
- After completion of the project, all information gathered during the focus groups, including audio recordings, will be securely disposed of.

The information obtained during the focus groups will be analysed by the researchers. This information will form the basis of a report, and is intended guide further research which we hope will lead to practical improvements in the availability and accessibility of toilets in Northumberland.

Last updated: 25 October 2016