



To go or not to go: The challenges of UK public toilet provision

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ABSTRACT

The United Kingdom's public toilet provision currently faces many challenges. This paper sets out some of the key barriers to providing inclusive toilet provision. We suggest that one of the key challenges provision faces is the taboo of the public toilet and that this contributes to a lack of recognition in the essentials of provision. However, we argue that the taboo around public toilets also affects future funding, not only of the provision itself but extends to research of the provision and its social and economic necessity. Such research would generate evidence on the importance of public toilets for everyone's successful urban living, but especially from a public health perspective that affects everyone.

1. Introduction

This paper will explore five points that highlight how the lack of research and the resulting knowledge gaps hamper what we know about UK public toilet provision, alongside the need for recognition from non-toilet researchers and funders of its central role in the built environment. The generation of this essential knowledge would in turn would provide evidence to policy makers of these essential facilities, to encourage modernising existing provision and perhaps building new provision fit for the 21st century and beyond.

1.1. Mind the gaps

When considering public toilet provision in the United Kingdom, what do we need to know? What are the gaps in our knowledge that, it can be argued, continuously frame public toilets as unworthy of further research enquiries?

Firstly, we do not know how many public toilets there actually are. The UK government does not count and record them, partly due to the ambiguity about what is considered a public toilet (Bichard and Ramster, 2025). This deficit of information becomes a rumour of a lack of provision. Does the taboo of public toilets prevent them from being accurately catalogued, and therefore are there more toilets than we think there are?

Secondly, concerning current provision, we are unsure of how acceptable or unacceptable to the public this is. The maligned perception of public toilets often results in buildings that present as tired and unloved, encompassing rumours of 'dirt' (Douglas, 1966a) and disgust

and as sites thought unsafe for users. Does the taboo of public toilets as dirty in both a physical and psychological 'dirt' influence perceptions of safety?

Thirdly, what happens when there are no public toilets? Street urination and defecation are taboo behaviours and also carry environmental and cost impacts. What role does toilet provision play in wider economic prosperity of our towns and cities? Does provision enable people to spend more time outside of their homes, a key factor in wellbeing? What role do public toilets play in wider public health?

Fourthly, is the lack of public toilets and the reluctance to build new provision a continued reverberation of one of the central taboos many societies hold, that of the body that menstruates, and goes through other biological changes through its lifetime including pregnancy and menopause. These bodies require more frequent access to toilet provision. Is the lack of public toilet provision an extension of this taboo, or a more insidious attempt to keep those bodies in place?

Lastly, do these taboos extend into academia, where research has raised the issue of public toilets to improve design (Bichard and Ramster, 2025), show historical significance (Penner, 2001), their key role in wider urban planning and decision making (Greed, 2003), and as a spatial weapon concerning safe space? (Slater and Jones, 2018) Is this research recognised as important in wider public health, transport, economic and urban decision making? Does the taboo make funding, and therefore research, more difficult, to answer and establish just how necessary public toilet provision is?

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2. Taboo

Before this paper explores the five points, it first needs to give an overview of what we consider 'taboo' and our use of this term. Understanding and researching taboo practices has long been the domain of anthropology and there are a number of related but varying definitions of the word (originating from the Polynesian term *Tabu* meaning forbidden or prohibited) (Hong, 2024). Every human society will have a taboo. They are often focused around sex, religion, death, food and most notably for this paper, bodily functions that include urination, defecation and menstruation. This taboo around our body eliminations has made discussing them also taboo, with the eliminations themselves considered offensive.

The taboos we have in our respective societies function to maintain social order, reinforce cultural values and norms, establish boundaries, and regulate behaviour, psychological functions and social and symbolic functions. However, the power functions taboos hold should also be noted. These include the creation and maintenance of power, control of social norms; a tool of oppression, resistance and subversion and cultural change (Anthroholic, 2023). These taboos of function and power can be seen to echo in varying degrees in the public toilet.

3. Counting public toilets?

In 2020, there were 7.19 million streetlights in the UK (2.8 million are in London).

How do we know this? The data was collected from all county and unitary local to create a national inventory, reported on by Streetlighting Advisory Services, representing 'an accurate snapshot of the UK's streetlighting estate'. (Streetlight Advisory Services) It allows the government and third parties to advise on the environmental and financial benefits of new lighting technologies or night-time dimming, with potential to research if there are relationships between street lighting and criminal activity or road traffic collisions. Council data also includes the location of each streetlight, so whilst there is no corresponding Public Toilets Advisory Service ... at least dogs know where to go.

Why do streetlights have a full survey and yet there is no equivalent documentation of public toilets? One reason points to complexities of ownership. What is a public toilet? When a property is wholly or mainly a public toilet, data is captured by the Valuations Office Agency (Non-Domestic Rating, 2021), and traditionally, these properties were owned and operated by local authorities (although there is no legal responsibility to do so). Since the turn of the millennium there has been a steady decrease in these publicly-owned toilets, primarily due to rising costs. However, this has not been a purely cost/benefit or 'bottom line' shift. There has been a wider change concerning responsibility extending to the private sector, alongside a form of devolution of responsibility (Bichard and Ramster, 2025).

Onus on private sector provision has emerged through 1) increased reliance on private toilets as public provision declined (supermarket toilets, departments stores); 2) the increased ownership or transfer of large estates that include toilets from public to private landlords (shopping centres, transport stations, regeneration areas); and 3) through community toilet schemes, whereby local businesses offer toilet access beyond their customer base, in many cases in return for payment from the local authority. This has become a popular response for many local authorities in many parts of the UK, who have decommissioned all or most of their public toilet stock. This public/private accommodation has had a mixture of success. Not all businesses in a scheme sign that their provision is 'publicly accessible', leaving many people unaware, or unknowingly making a purchase, in order to use the toilet. Businesses who do sign up to community toilet schemes still hold the right to refuse access, resulting in people who need public provision with no facilities (the unhoused or those who do not fit with a business' customer persona). Contracts between the local authority and business may be renewed every few years with new businesses added and existing

businesses dropping out of the arrangement. Currently there is no research evaluating the effect of community toilet schemes.

A form of devolution of public toilet provision has also taken place, by handing over the responsibility (and associated costs) to community and/or parish councils. In some ways this recognises the importance of facilities as a community asset (Bichard and Ramster, 2025) and breaks the taboo of toilets by community recognition that bodily functions need to be catered for. Local providers can adapt provision to what is financially and socially acceptable. In southwest England, one community council made the decision to close the men's provision and convert the women's provision gender neutral as the solution to meeting the costs of keeping the toilets open.

The resulting fracturing of provision between public (local authority), private (business) and community has resulted in a lack of distinct, meaningful and verifiable numbers of toilet provision, and no consensus on what we should be counting between publicly-maintained toilets (those owned or maintained by councils) or publicly-accessible toilets (those the public can use, excluding customer-only toilets), the latter of which is often the preference of the public (Bichard and Hanson, 2009).

4. Purity and Danger

A key anthropological text that focuses on our conceptions and perceptions of 'matter out of place' is Mary Douglas's 1966 publication *Purity and Danger* (Douglas, 1966a). Douglas begins her 'brilliant continent and eon-spanning book' (Zaloom, 2020) with her experience in a domestic toilet, in which gardening tools and books were also kept. Zaloom (2020) captures Douglas' disquiet at elements of the outside (the garden and its associated dirt) being juxtaposed on the inside (the 'impeccably clean' toilet complete with bookshelves).

Douglas' work and its central hypothesis of dirt equating danger and cleanliness equating safety resonates in the cultural space we designate as a public toilet. Our dirt is matter out of place if it's not in the toilet. However, this binary set up of one or other is not so clearcut in the public toilet. Walking into a cubicle that has not been flushed, where matter is not out of place, but it is other people's matter now becomes dirt. Here is where we often shift our neat categories of dirtiness and cleanliness. They are not fixed but are context specific and our reactions to others' dirt extends not only to the environment but also to the other user.

The Royal Society of Public Health's 2019 report 'Taking the p*** The Decline of the Great British Public Toilet' (Royal Society for Public Health, 2019) undertook a survey of 2089 adults and found that over 70 % of women would not use a public toilet because it was 'often unclean' and that over 60 % of women would not use provision because it smells bad. Bichard and Hanson (2009) (Bichard and Hanson, 2009), in a survey of 211 people found that 69 % of women would not use a public toilet, yet 80 % of women felt there should be more public toilets. In the RSPH's study nearly 60 % of men reported they would not use a public toilet because it was 'often unclean' and smelt bad (Royal Society for Public Health, 2019) whilst in Bichard & Hanson's study, 63 % of men reported they did not use public toilets but 90 % of men felt there should be more public provision.

Despite these small discrepancies in gender, it can be presupposed that many of the UK public perceive public toilets as dirty. Bichard & Hanson's survey also asked if respondents preferred to use private toilet provision. 79 % of men and 83 % of women responded 'yes', yet to reiterate 90 % of men and 80 % of women felt there should be more public provision (which they may never use due to its association with being dirty). This presents many questions for further research on public toilets and the public's attitude to provision. Current discussions on public toilets seldom focus on the details of the public's concerns (hygiene and cleanliness) but more often on who has a right of access.

Despite legal structures for building access such as the Building Regulations and the Equality Act, many public toilets, especially those for disabled people, have not been updated with appropriate internal fixtures (grab rails in recommended configurations, lever taps and door

locks). (Hanson et al., 2007; Bichard and Hanson, 2009; Bichard and Ramster, 2025) Consequently, much of the UK's existing public toilet stock is old and can be considered poorly accessible both in general access and in the internal fittings and fixtures. This has resulted in an existing stock that presents as tired and uncared for (adding to a perception of the toilet being dirty) as well as restricting wider access for not only disabled people, but older people and people accompanying children. Research is needed to capture the state of existing stock to highlight how poorly access has been installed and/or maintained.

More recent developments in rights of access have emerged with the introduction of unisex or non-gendered (gender neutral) provision. In 2024, the UK government issued Approved Document T (Building Regulations, 2024) of the Building Regulations for standard and ambulant toilet provision. This was produced from a government call for technical evidence for the case for improving 'single sex' toilet access and 'ensure there is a fair provision of accessible and gender-neutral toilets'. It received 17,500 responses. (Gov UK Consultation Outcome) Approved Document T utilises the term 'universal' toilet for provision that is not 'single sex' and limits the universal design to one: a fully-enclosed toilet that includes a basin. It only applies to new buildings, with the universal option in place if there is enough space after gender specific toilets have been designed in, or as the only form of provision for smaller buildings. Rather than ensuring fair provision of gender neutral toilets, there may be no provision for those who do not identify with binary gender categories, are excluded or unable to access gender specific toilets, or are accompanying someone of another gender. It limits provision and non-gendered toilet design.

Non-gendered provision has been available in the UK since the 1970s through the unisex accessible ('disabled') toilet. It is also found generally in smaller businesses, many chain coffee shops, train, airplane and coach toilets. It seems that the context of provision determines what is acceptable and not acceptable, with different rules applied depending on the culture and political perception behind toilet provision rather than user access or need (Bichard and Ramster, 2025).

YouGov is an online national 'snapshot' survey and polling site that has biannually tracked 'support for separate toilets for men and women, and gender-neutral toilets in public spaces' since 2019. (You Gov <https://www.yougov.com>) When the question was launched in August 2019 it found that 54 % of respondents supported gender separate toilets and 32 % supported 'gender-neutral as well as gender separate provision' (much lower numbers have supported 'only gender neutral toilets', between 5 and 9 %). The most recent data (January 2025) showed 59 % supporting gender separate only and 32 % for a combination. Note that this data uses the less familiar term 'gender neutral' over 'unisex', and gives no parameters to gender neutral toilet design, which can therefore cover fully-enclosed toilets such as provision on trains, to much less common layouts with shared handwashing and partition walls between toilets.

This ongoing tracker also provides responses in terms of age, gender, region of the UK and social grade. The greatest difference in support can be seen in age groupings, with peak support for provision that includes gender neutral facilities in the 18–24 age group (August 2022: 58 % with gender neutral toilets; 20 % without), and peak support for only separate gender toilets amongst 65+ age group (January 2021: 21 % with; 73 % without gender neutral toilets).

The YouGov data responses can also be analysed by gender and here some surprising results can be found. Separate gender toilets has often been designated a 'woman's issue', yet the data shows less support for gender neutral toilets alongside separate toilets from men. In January 2025, 38 % of women supported gender neutral as well as gender separate toilets in public spaces, compared with 26 % of men.

The YouGov tracker highlights that types of provision is as much as an issue for men as it is for women – perhaps more so. Further research is needed to interrogate this starting point of data, especially that might include regional variations and social categories in preferences between ages and gender, as well as exploring whether these responses are cultural driven, politically driven, or relate to factors such as wait times,

privacy, and cleanliness that can be considered by design independently of gender access. Nor does the data show the strength of support or how this impacts decisions. A second YouGov question, 'generally, would you feel comfortable or uncomfortable using a gender neutral toilet in a public place?' has both options hovering between 40 and 50 % over the years, though women are less comfortable with gender neutral toilets in general. Again, this question would give more insight if it distinguished between single occupancy spaces like the wheelchair-accessible toilet or universal toilet, compared to shared facilities with partitioned cubicles and communal handwashing.

Does the taboo of public toilets as dirty in both a physical and psychological 'dirt' influence perceptions of safety? The RSPH (Royal Society for Public Health, 2019) survey found that concerns on safety were lowest on the list of reasons not to use public toilets for both women and men (both under 20 %), far below cleanliness, smell and lack of toilet paper and cost, more obvious barriers to entry. Yet, public toilets have become an issue of 'safe space' for many people challenging gender violence (Lewkowitz and Gilliland, 2025). Currently there is no qualitative or quantitative research that supports this. In 2021 a Freedom of Information (FOI) request was made to the Office of National Statistics (ONS) for data concerning sexual assaults in public restrooms. (Office for National Statistics) The ONS responded that no data exists on such crimes within public restrooms. An FOI was also sent to North Wales Police (Heddlu Gogledd Cymru North Wales) also asking for data concerning sexual assaults in public toilets. This request received a response where the location of the crime was recorded as 'public toilet' and showed that between 2014 and 2023 there were 29 recorded offences of people aged 18 and over and 11 recorded offences under 18 (n = 40), with 4 people aged 18 and over and 4 people aged under 18 charged with offences (n = 8). However, the data does not show if the offences were male on female, male on male, female on male or female on female violence or the facility they took place in, to draw links between violence in public toilets, and gender separate spaces. Whilst there is no official collection of data on sexual assaults in public toilets, we have been monitoring media reports for a number of years and although not officially collated, our observations are that the majority of articles about sexual assaults in public toilets, where the offender is charged and reported, relates to male on male violence, in the men's provision. This would reflect wider held statistics on crime in public space where men are more likely to be perpetrators and victims compared to women who are more likely to be the victims of violence and sexual assault in homes (Dawson, 2021). It should be noted that the majority of news reports on public toilets concerns vandalism, and more often in the men's provision.

While historically women's public toilet provision has been a feminist issue, a wider interpretation of feminist concerns should also include men's safety especially in public space.

The taboo of toilets is held in multiple contexts when considered as a private space where 'dirty things happen'. It reverberates in how the provision is regarded and cared for (or not as is often the case), and subsequently provision may be viewed with suspicion and considered unsafe. The prominence and uptake of gender neutral provision in the UK has been stymied by the introduction by the last Conservative government of Approved Document T of the Building Regulations, which mandates separate gender facilities in most cases with gender neutral facilities as an optional extra. It fails to recognise that a building's life may well exceed current preferences, that the views of a building's specific user group might be different from overall public perception or consider the impacts from unisex toilet provision that benefit genders, such as people accompanying children, or the positive impact on toilet queues for women (Bovens and Marcoci, 2020).

Has Douglas (1966b) concept of 'matter out of place' been prescribed to not only what comes out of the body but other bodies who use public toilets? Transgression of such boundaries are seen to make the space of the public toilet unsafe for one set of users yet reported crime figures do not support this. Could continued gender segregated provision continue

to control social norms? If one set of toilets is seen as unsafe, its users vulnerable, how does this continue a stereotype of subservience and/or vulnerability, unable to protect the self and in a state of constant danger? Fear is a powerful mechanism of social control. Continued segregation is perceived as a women's issue but fails to recognise that toilet provision is for all genders, that men are also vulnerable and that through systems of patriarchal power, segregation keep us all in place.

5. Public health and economic growth facilitator

The Covid-19 pandemic gave the UK some insight into life without public toilet provision. Initially closures restricted access for many in their daily exercise allocation, as well as hampering many key workers who relied on toilet provision for their journeys to or during work (Bichard and Ramster, 2021; Bichard and Ramster, 2025). As 'stay at home' restrictions were lifted yet 'social distancing' remained in place, many took advantage of what was unusually fine weather for the UK to be outside with socially distanced family and friends. However, public toilets remained closed resulting in multiple instances of outside urination and defecation as well as reports of public toilets being broken into to be used (Bichard and Ramster, 2025).

Although public toilets had become of central importance leading up to lockdown, with multiple public health reminders to 'wash your hands', during the periods of lockdown, their role as facilitator for public health was forgotten. They were not prioritised as an essential service to keep open despite over half the working population, as designated key workers, continuing their normal routines. (Office of National Statistics)

The provision of public toilets was neglected during this unprecedented situation of a global pandemic. It took a letter from government departments to all local authorities to remind them to keep toilets open (Bichard and Ramster, 2025).

Whilst the oversight concerning the provision of toilets can be seen as an exceptional example during the pandemic, the omission of their central importance to public health as a public service can seem endemic within national government. Nearly all policy documents for transport or urban infrastructure fail to mention 'public toilets'. For example, the Department of Transport's 'Cycle Infrastructure Design' (Department of Transport, 2020) sets out to increase cycling as a form of 'mass transport' for 'people of all ages and abilities'. The guidance notes that cycling increased during lockdown. However, the document makes no mention of the need for public toilets on potential cycle routes, despite citing the Equality Act (2010) (Equality Act 2010) that infrastructure should be accessible to all. This could be problematic for the 20 million people who manage bladder and/or bowel continence and do or perhaps want to cycle. (NHS England New guidance to) Research has yet to capture how many people may be dissuaded from taking up healthier lifestyles due to the lack of public toilet provision.

This one example highlights how the provision of toilets as part of improvements to a major shift in transport infrastructure has not been considered. It should also be noted that the document also recognises an increase in walking, which will require rest stops to use toilet provision. In comparison, Age UK, a charity that supports older people, have noted how many older people are restricted from leaving their homes even to walk to local shops due to the lack of public toilets (AgeUK London, 2022). This has been noted to have increased a sense of isolation and loneliness, a major mental and public health concern.

Why does the omissions of public toilet provision in policy documents happen? One reason could be that, similarly to the disjointed provision, public toilets fall under no one government department. Are they essential to public transport? – yes. Do they come under the remit of the Department of Transport – no. Does encouraging more people to cycle contribute to better public health? – yes. Are public toilets in the remit of public health? – no. The one government department that has some responsibility for public toilets through their remit over Building Regulations (but only in design, not in wider provision) is the Ministry of

Housing, Communities and Local Government. However, a search through the Ministry's directory finds no direct mention of the provision of public toilets or whose responsibility it might be at local council level; waste services, recycling and rubbish, street cleaning, public buildings, community, parks, transport, public health or the environment.

There is a need for responsibility for public toilets to be added to a government department, such as transport, public health or communities. Or does the discreet remit of government departments and their responsibilities prevent this? We are not hearing reports of government ministers fighting for this responsibility, yet it remains a key local 'doorstep issue', similar to 'dog mess' which does have directions on the government website on how to deal with it. (Gov. UK).

Could such a lack of governance and ownership of this policy issue be due to the taboo of toilets? Are our consecutive governments embarrassed that the population needs to urinate, defecate and menstruate?

Despite their reputation for prudishness, the UK's Victorian for-bearers (with specific consideration of the Ladies Sanitary Association) (Elphick, 2018), planned and built many public conveniences (this term being another challenge to counting toilets – what term has been used?). Are our 21st century governments more prudish in their failure to recognise the importance of public toilets?

Revisiting the historical legacy of provision, we can see that public sanitation was a remit of public health through the first and second Public Health Acts (1848 and 1875 respectively) (Elphick, 2018). Although focused more on sewers as opposed to toilets, it did kickstart their construction in many UK cities, many of which are still standing today, albeit not always still functioning as public toilets.

Perhaps the remit of public toilets should fall to the Department of Business and Trade? How much is the lack of public toilet provision hampering business growth? – a major concern of the UK's recently elected Labour government. A recent report by a central London community reported that business revenue would grow by nearly £5 million a year if toilet provision met actual need and save the local authority £300,000 a year from street cleaning urination and defecation (Grew, 2024). As described earlier, communities already recognise the benefit of public toilets for locals and visitors alike.

Our research project 'Engaged' found that the lack of public toilets prevented many people staying longer in their local high streets (Ramster et al.). The RSPH (Royal Society for Public Health, 2019) survey found that the majority of respondents wanted more toilets in parks and residential areas. This suggests people need more local provision for local activities that improve health and wellbeing but can also contribute to local economies. Currently there is no nationwide UK data on how the provision of public toilets may benefit economic growth (although international research suggests that it does) (Webber, 2021). Research is needed to measure the impact of public toilets in economic terms, both in current use and after closures, and especially for any economic growth that occurs should new public toilets be built.

6. Biological necessity and cultural consideration

It is a biological fact that we all need to excrete and therefore we all need to use the toilet. Yet, we do not all need to use the toilet equally, people vary on how often they have 'to go'. Many people have bladder and bowel conditions that can result in needing to use the toilet urgently and/or frequently. It has to be noted that more conditions of the bladder and bowel are reported in women, and an existing condition maybe intensified during menstruation. Whilst it is a biological fact that we all excrete and over half the population will have menstruated at some point in their lives, it is a cultural consideration of where we as a society choose to manage this.

The UK's Building Regulation: Approved Document T now stipulates that all cubicles in both the men's, women's and universal provision should have disposal (formerly sanitary) bins. This has been in recognition that men also need disposal bins for the collection of colostomy and urostomy bags but also serves non-binary people and trans men

managing menstruation.

Cis men and women, trans men and women, non-binary people all have excretory biological needs. How we as a society meet these needs will often say more about our culture than it does about our bodies. Whilst separate gender toilets were once the norm for the standard provision, our gender identity or how others interpret it does not always align within a static, binary system. After the UK Supreme Court ruling that access to single sex spaces relates to someone's sex at birth, separate gender toilets are increasingly exclusionary spaces, and alternative gender neutral facilities are not mandatory. This puts people of all genders at risk of exclusion, humiliation, verbal harassment or physical assault from other users (Slater and Jones; Cavanagh, 2010).

One aspect of excreting that many of us share is the desire to do so in privacy. This is being recognised in more toilet design with fully enclosed cubicles, many that will also include sinks. The current preference for separate gender provision may be down to the lack of privacy in current multi-cubicle toilet design, in which sharing with all genders would contravene current cultural norms. Research is needed to determine how design is shaping attitudes. Research has highlighted that gender neutral provision of several designs actively decreases queue times for women whilst maintaining or slightly increasing queue times for men, bringing an equity to waiting to use the toilet. (Bovens and Marcoci) It can only be surmised that given the gender imbalance in architecture and planning, (Royal Institute of British Architects) once this equity in waiting is realised will we then see more provision for everyone.

The toilet queue is a complicated structure, with some people reporting discomfort at queuing with their opposite gender. Again, research is needed to clarify if wider design considerations have resulted in this discomfort, and how changes to design can alleviate this. However, what can be read from the queue for the toilet (predominately for the women's toilets) is that the provision is currently inadequate.

Many women will use the toilet more frequently during their menstrual cycle, then again during pregnancy, then again during menopause. If a woman also has a bladder or bowel condition, the need to use the toilet may be intensified during these times. In short, women, throughout their life, will go to the toilet a lot. Collectively we have decided that going to the toilet for women will be done in privacy where we are shielded from other women, because we have to expose more of our bodies to use the toilet. Yet there are more considerations to add to this mix. Women still tend to be responsible for the majority of child and elder care, meaning they may often be accompanying a young child or older person to the toilet (who in turn may require more frequent access to toilets). Women tend to use more public transport and undertake trip chaining where they will make multiple stops opposed to a straight A to B journey. Given these other factors of many women's lives, the biological need to use the toilet and the sheer lack of provision to meet this need is extremely problematic (Bichard and Ramster, 2025).

Why is this? In the UK we have a historical tradition of poor provision for women, but this should, by now, have been overtaken by wider considerations of the complexities of women's lives and the many roles they play in our societies. The lack of toilet provision continues to hold them by the 'urinary leash', a term noted in Victorian England where 'women could only go as far as their bladders would allow them' (Elphick, 2018).

It can also be considered that women's bodies also remain taboo due to menstruation. Our infrastructure has never supported the disposal of sanitary products, and as preference for these change from tampons and pads to menstrual cups (in line with greater climate change concerns) (Bichard and Ramster, 2025), how will provision meet this need? Will women be further corralled into only using certain spaces that meet their needs whilst they address other moral considerations, simply due to the lingering taboo of the menstruating body? Globally we are seeing women's rights facing unprecedented threats as 'patriarchy is gaining ground'. (United Nations) How does restricting access to structures that meet our bodily needs reflect this? Are women being kept in place, at

home, at work, and reliant on private provision in commercial centres to keep them shopping?

Yet in this era of patriarchy gaining ground against women, women also become agents of the patriarchal project. The focus should not be, as it has in recent years, on challenging access to toilets amongst other women and non-binary people, who need a safe space to be, to pee. More research is needed to truly understand people's concerns regarding shared or individual toilet provision, to understand how design can make a difference for better (or for worse). We need to build bridges between our social identity desires that meet a fundamental human need.

7. Breaking taboos, plugging gaps in knowledge

One of the key aims of this paper has been to highlight the current knowledge gaps regarding the provision of public toilets, especially for evidenced knowledge that can be utilised by policy makers to improve and extend provision. Our need for toilets will not go away, yet the importance of this necessary structure in our built environment has not been the focus of research funders.

Could this be the toilet taboo extend to the funding bodies we rely on? University research funding is not cheap. Calls for proposals focus on broad policy topics such as health disparities, community regeneration or sustainability. The issue of public toilets, their poor design, lack of provision, the needs of children (beyond baby changing) are a key component of such subjects but so far have not featured when these matters are fleshed out. Public toilets concern everyone, and this component of our built environment influences wider population needs.

When funding on toilet research is successful, it tends to be focused on a local or regional area or a specific health need. Whilst this generates important data, it contributes to a fractured knowledge (similar to the provision itself) where we only have one piece of the puzzle. The UK needs UK-wide research to highlight the gaps not only in provision but where regional and national concerns may differentiate or align. Such evidence could prove instrumental in devising local, regional and even national toilet strategies. In addition, new opportunities for sustaining provision can be explored to ensure public toilets are not here today but gone tomorrow. Our Engaged project, centred on London, explored alternative models for provision. Whilst the results of this work can be extended to other regions, in many ways it would have to be replicated by regional variations of both landscape and population. Is such regional research findings truly cost effective to a UK wide concern? Possibly not, but here those pursuing funding appear to be chasing their tail. UK wide research will cost more than local research, better something than nothing.

One reason why the UK's main academic funding body may shy away from big public toilet projects may be the media reaction to the use of public money in such enquiry. Slater (2023) (Slater) outlines the media backlash their 'Around the Toilet' research received including a comment from the Taxpayers Alliance (a right-wing pressure group) that stated, 'People will be furious to see their hard-earned cash flushed away like this'. Yet this comment contradicts research that says people think there should be more public toilets (Bichard and Hanson, 2009). We need to understand people's needs and preferences. Our current model of provision in which the design takes a one size fits all approach may not be fit for purpose in a nation of variable ages, beliefs, identities, sizes and abilities. We need more research to inform the decision makers of these issues and more research, that is of high quality, verifiable and robust. Such enquiries will cost for its initial outlay but may have greater social and financial impact in extending access and saving public money in the long term.

8. Conclusion

To go or not to go, that is the question this paper has explored through five issues that we've identified as current barriers for

improving UK toilet provision. There are many more that need exploring and require further research. We suggest that our taboo around our bodies need to excrete and manage menstruation is reflected in our attitudes towards public toilet provision, in which we recognise the need and value the provision but would at the same time rather not use public toilets due to their current state. In turn this taboo is reflected structurally in the lack of interest in either legislating for provision or assigning responsibility (at both a local and national level). Taboos are further invoked between users that encompass fear and are transferred onto the space as one that is or is not safe. Would reframing public toilets as facilitators of public health management help break these taboos? It's possible but only further research may provide the evidence and establish this. And here further taboos are met with academic enquiry on public toilets not identified by funding bodies, whilst researchers themselves face wider derision and condemnation from 'the public' via the media. Which takes us full circle in that public toilets as the place where we excrete is not something we talk about. This taboo needs to be broken if we are going to challenge the loss of provision, revitalise existing provision and build new provision that lasts into the 22nd century.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jo-Anne Bichard: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. **Gail Ramster:** Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

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