

'A disabled loo shouldn't be an optional extra'

On a mission to make London toilets truly accessible

Accessible toilets for the public should not be treated as 'an optional extra', a North London wheelchair user has argued.

Wheelchair user Kate said London is not inclusive if you have a physical disability and is calling for change.

When Kate moves around London, she assumes a toilet for her either does not exist, is out of order, the lift is broken or it is simply unusable.

She said, in Crouch End where she lives, there are around five pubs she can get into, usually after waiting for staff to put out a ramp at the entrance. But even then, most do not have a toilet she can use.

She said: "Why would you go to a pub where you're supposed to have some drinks and some food but there is no loo?"

"London is an inclusive city where everyone is welcome, as long as you don't have a physical disability. As long as you don't want to go out," she added.

Most businesses would not hesitate because of costs when installing a standard toilet so why are disabled toilets treated differently, Kate asked.

She said: "A disabled loo shouldn't be an optional extra."

Her comments came on World Toilet Day as campaigners called on Transport for London (TfL) to make toilet access inclusive for all.

For this year's initiative, the focus is on TfL because while the transport network opened a new accessible toilet at Seven Sisters in July, the station itself is not accessible, making it unusable for many people with disabilities.

The London Loo Alliance (Age UK London), a group of organisations passionate about toilet provision in the capital, highlighted the inconsistency between TfL's £15 million investment to improve toilet access for everyone and choosing an inaccessible station to put in a new accessible toilet.

John McGeachy, Coordinator of the London Loo Alliance, said: "You've got an accessible toilet at an inaccessible station. A lot of these things come down to funding, but it's still a bit of a ridiculous situation."



REVOLOOTION: The London Loo Alliance raising awareness outside Seven Sisters station



Credit: Peony Li

INSPECTION: Elodie Pinn, Campaigns support officer Age UK, is examining a new accessible toilet

Julia Modern, senior policy and campaigns manager at Inclusion London, a deaf and disabled people's organisation part of the Alliance, lives nearby but due to her mobility issues, can neither access the station nor the newly accessible toilet.

Julia said: "The question I have for TfL is, why was this one prioritised given that it isn't an accessible station?"

Lucy Drake, Head of press desk at TfL, said that the transport network had won funding for lifts to the Overground platforms where the new toilet is located, but due to a funding shortfall, the project has been paused.



INCLUSION FOR ALL: John McGeachy from the London Loo Alliance is committed to making London more accessible

This is not only a London transport problem, but the lack of prioritising toilet access appears to be a wider issue in the capital.

Age UK published a report earlier this year, stating that over 10 years, among 30 participating councils in London, three times as many public toilets have been closed as they have been opened.

Added to that, public toilet conversion is trending, with 10 public London toilets having been converted to pubs, bars and cafes since 2014, the London Evening Standard reported.

In 2023, the Great British Public Toilet Map showed that London had 1,463 public toilets. Of these, only 41% were accessible toilets, with one of the London boroughs, Hounslow, just having 13 accessible toilets out of 117 public toilets.

Gail Ramster, Designer of the Great British Public Toilet Map, said: “I mean, there's a point where you can't have any fewer.”

One of the issues is that councils aren't legally required to provide toilets and most councils don't even have data on their own toilet availability, she added.



Gail Ramster, Designer of Inclusive Spaces, stands up for public health

Toilets might be a taboo topic, but everyone needs access to a bathroom. For many people, though, especially those with accessibility needs, finding a usable toilet is challenging.

Dean Neils, Head of Customer Success at AccessAble, an accessibility guide, gets monthly phone calls from people reporting that a supposedly accessible toilet isn't truly accessible.

He said that in one example, after just being added to the accessibility guide, a toilet had been turned into a storage cupboard for a quad bike.

But that's not the only problem, Dean added. Even if the toilet is fit to use, this doesn't guarantee everyone with accessibility needs can use it.

"There are many different disabilities. You could look at two people and think their needs are the same, but they can be totally different," Dean said.

Kate, for example, has had struggles with accessing toilets because of the size of her wheelchair.

She said: "There's a gym around the corner which says they've got an accessible loo, but it's not big enough to get a wheelchair in. So, I could go in, but I couldn't close the door."

Kasia, from West London, is visually impaired and, therefore, has completely different needs. Because of her guide dog, she uses accessible toilets but has been struggling with no-contrast walls and touchscreen automated doors.

She recalled a visit to the Design Museum in London: "Everything is stainless steel and I've been there a few times, but I still don't know how to flush the toilet."

"I cannot tell if the door has been locked or not. I'm supposed to touch for the door to unlock but I don't know how. It says something visual, but I cannot see it," Kasia added

The Design Museum was contacted for comment.

Advocates, such as toilet map designer Gail, see toilet access as part of a larger issue of inclusion.

She said, the lack of accessible toilets excludes people from accessing society, from shops and museums to meeting friends and staying independent.

A big problem is that disabled people stay away from inaccessible public spaces, which makes people assume they do not exist, Gail added.

"Of course, there will be people that would be using your service if you provided this and choosing you over someone else as well, because it's a more accessible space. So, the more people you can design for, why design people out?" she added.

The responsibility lies with the councils; however, these do not have enough money to provide all the necessary toilets, John McGeachy, London Loo Alliance, said.

The campaigners are appealing to the national government to support councils and for all organisations like businesses, private enterprises and transport operators to take responsibility and contribute.

In the end, Dean from AccessAble said, everyone is asking for the same thing.

“We just want people to be able to go out, enjoy everything that the local communities have got to offer and for it to be a level playing field,” he said.

Kate said her wish is simple: “Just being able to go out and know that the accessible toilet is actually accessible.”