

Engaged:

A toilet on every high street

Royal College of Art
**THE HELEN HAMLYN
CENTRE FOR DESIGN**



Supported by:



MAYOR OF LONDON

Introduction: Partners & Funding

The **Engaged** project is run by the **Public Toilets Research Unit (PTRU)** based at **The Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design (HHCD)** at the **Royal College of Art (RCA)**, in partnership with **PiM studio Architects**.



Engaged is one of 20 innovation projects in the **Mayor of London's** *Designing London's Recovery* programme, in response to the *High Streets for All* mission.



Engaged is also being generously supported and guided by the **Greater London Authority** and the **Design Council**.



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Introduction: Public Toilet Need

People are at the heart of the high street, but need public toilets to spend longer there, to participate in their community and in the local economy.

For people who are older, have young families, or continence conditions, access to toilets can be the deciding factor in which high street to visit, or whether to visit at all. Yet public toilets in England and Wales have reduced by 35% since 2000*, despite public support.

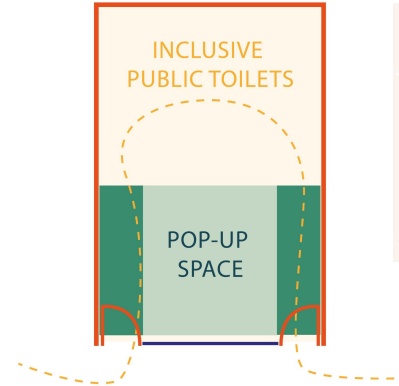
And while community toilet schemes provide additional facilities, they can also fall short on accessibility, inclusive design and high footfall demands.

*Hansard, 2021, H.L. Vol 811:426

Introduction: Engaged concept

Engaged investigates how to reuse empty premises as public toilets which would share space with start-ups, incubator space or community initiatives, to provide this overlooked element of public health infrastructure that supports high street regeneration.

As leaders in inclusive design, **PTRU** will develop toilet facilities that meet the needs of those who are often excluded, for and with the local community, through co-design methods.



The Engaged Workshop: Overview

The workshop comprised surveys, a presentation and 6 hands-on activities:

An opening survey gathered participant's perception of public toilet need.

The PTRU shared ideas on accessibility and inclusive design, and introduced the Engaged concept.

An ice-breaker activity explored officers' desires and ideals around public toilet design.

The following activities captured officers' understanding of their own borough's strengths and opportunities for Engaged; what they felt the barriers to implementing Engaged might be, and explored how a version of Engaged might fit within their unique borough needs and characteristics.

A closing survey sought to capture the value of Engaged's ideas and the workshop.



Workshop Findings: Evidence of toilet need

Officers were already keenly aware of the need for public toilets as a crucial element of public health provision, and in enabling general access to public spaces and the high street.

They recognised public toilets as being a lifeline for those with additional needs or vulnerabilities.

Access to public spaces was also a top reason for providing toilets on high streets specifically. Inclusive access and the need to ‘dwell longer’ on high streets was a close second. Toilets on high streets enables increased footfall and supports local regeneration broadly (beyond retail).

Participants’ notion of ‘inclusivity’ incorporated gender considerations, practical concerns and the ability to cope with high footfall and future pandemics (space, ventilation).

Live

< Prev Poll: 1

Why are public toilets so important?

- - essential for public health - makes high streets more accessible for people to get out
- Using a toilet is essential for a number of reasons. For example, people with disabilities under the DDA, others have temporary needs to have access within a short period of time. Toilets also provide a handwash provision.
- Public toilets are important to provide a safe and accessible place for people to use the toilet as and when they need to. So it is important for people to have leisure time experiences. It is also important for people with disabilities or illnesses that are not visible to have access to toilets. For example, colitis.
- for inclusivity and usability of our town
- Because everyone uses toilets! Not having them can cause many physical and mental health issues

Workshop Findings: £1m Loo Spend

Lots of comments fell under the umbrella of basic toilet and public health provisions:

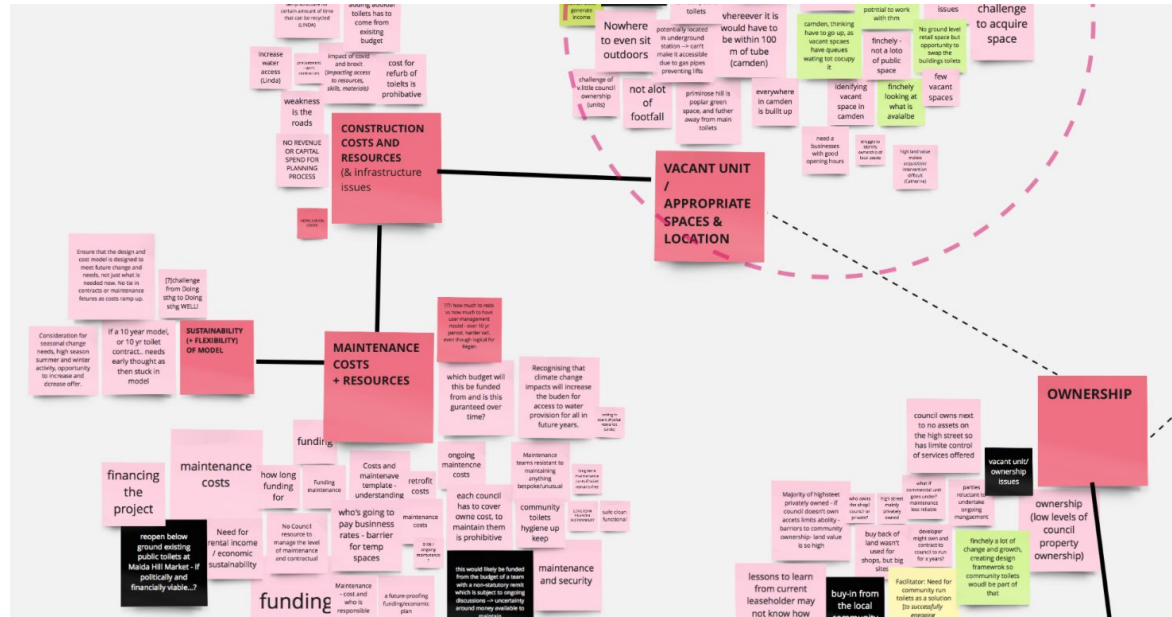
- **on basic provision:** toilets being clean, well maintained, with dry floors.
- **on achieving accessibility for all:** free services; disability access; gender inclusivity; cultural inclusivity; breastfeeding spaces; support for drug users.
- **on making users feel safe:** day or night through natural visibility, attendants, maintenance updates.
- **on providing health and well-being support:** drinking water; safe rest space; washing facilities; space to accommodate bike/pram/scooter.
- **on basic consumables:** toilet paper; free sanitary wear.

Opening survey responses tallied with this: officers wanted to see better standards of cleanliness and accessibility features; gender-neutral provisions; and more safe areas to rest.

Workshop Findings: Barriers to Engaged

In small groups, officers discussed what they felt would be specific barriers and challenges to implementing Engaged on their borough's high streets.

Participants drew on their perception of broader public toilet provision and their experience and knowledge of toilet provision in their borough.



Workshop Findings: Barriers to Engaged

Barriers fell under 4 umbrella areas:

PRACTICAL – the availability of vacant units or spaces; appropriate locations; construction costs; infrastructure issues; maintenance costs; future proofing.

BUREAUCRATIC – establishing supportive partnerships with developers & landlords; ownership issues; legal or planning issues; partners' agenda priorities or conflicts; real & perceived responsibility to provide toilets.

SAFETY & SECURITY – managing: local issues (e.g. anti-social behaviour); vandalism; drug use; public perception of public toilet safety (and what impacts this).

COMMUNITY & ACCESSIBILITY – managing: wayfinding; 24hr opening; meeting local needs (cultural inclusivity; homelessness; drug use; key clientele needs e.g. night-time economy); successful community engagement and co-design.

Workshop Findings: Barriers to Engaged

Insights for three barrier areas that received a significant number of comments include:

Access to appropriate spaces and locations:

- lack of vacant units generally.
- poor footfall, visibility or inaccessible location, where vacant units exist.
- finding businesses that would support access via extended opening hours.

Bureaucracy:

- having to work within council priorities, plans, agendas and budgets and managing conflicts arising from these; and managing the impact of gaps relating to ownership or provision responsibilities.
- managing relationships landlords and land owners.
- managing relationships with developers.
- uncertainties re: sustaining long-term toilet solutions – perceptions around pursuing new ideas over existing provisions.

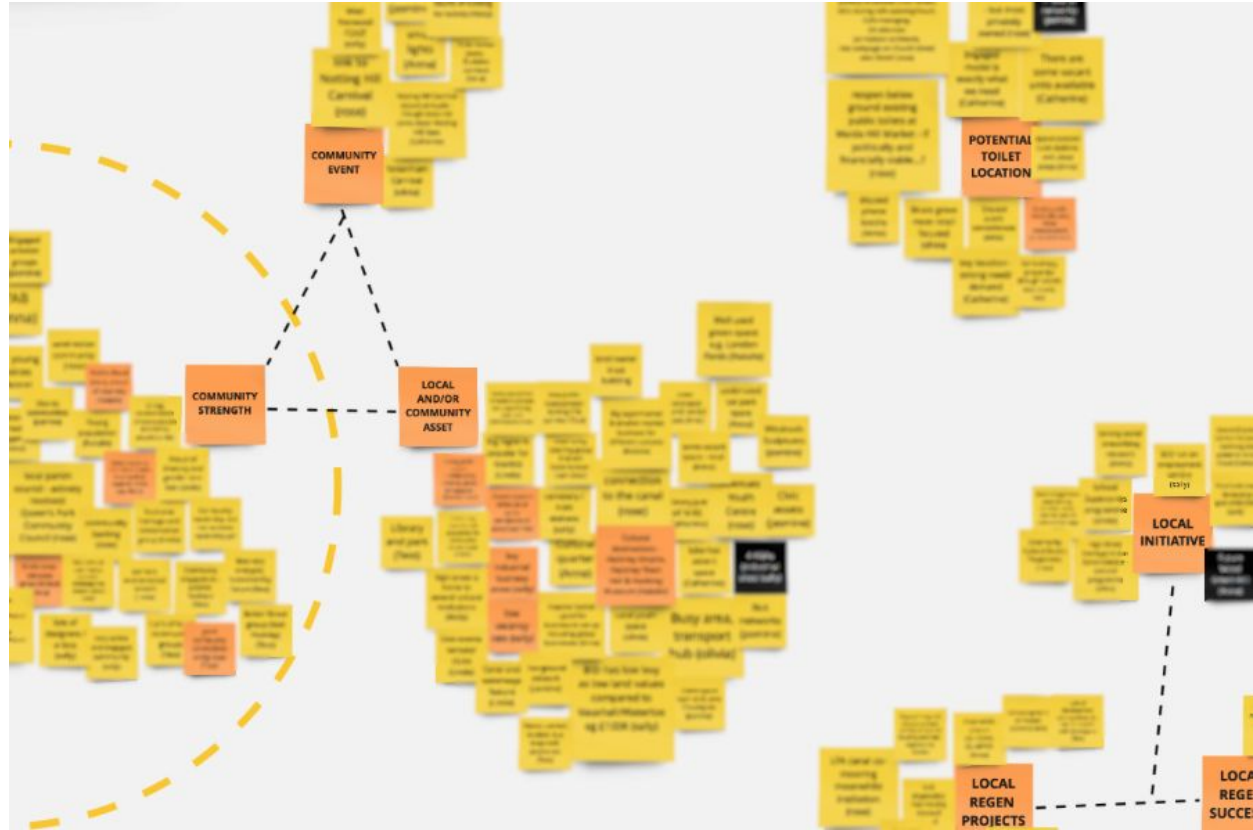
Safety & Security:

- managing the balance between 24hr, free access to all – where this might invite misuse.
- managing the public's real and perceived safety in toilets.
- tackling the direct impact of anti-social behaviour as an ongoing barrier to sustainability.

Workshop Findings: Opportunities for Engaged

Officers individually explored the strengths & characteristics of their borough by mapping and ideating around their high street case studies.

These activities subsequently enabled small groups to collaboratively explore potential opportunities for Engaged – and feasible versions of the concept, tailored to suit each borough's needs and physicalities.



Workshop Findings: Opportunities for Engaged

Officers' keen understanding of their borough's community strengths and assets (people-based, networks, physical assets, infrastructure) – and their desire to activate their borough and high street potential – establishes council partnerships as a key enabler for Engaged.

Any version of Engaged will need to align with key community activities and also understand the relationship between local regeneration plans and the community engagement that these plans seek to serve.

Working collaboratively with regeneration officers and their knowledge of their area's physical and characteristic strengths will help Engaged to:

- Mutually co-support local community activity
- Meet Engaged's co-design goals
- Improve chances of implementing Engaged

Workshop Findings: Opportunities for Engaged

Additional insights:

- **Officers reported confidence in council support and involvement in pursuing Engaged locally** - however a larger number of comments anticipating bureaucratic barriers (many in relation to local council planning) suggest Engaged will need to establish a range of council department relationships in planning implementation.
- Many officers could also see **potential support for Engaged via BID teams, local businesses, and by building on local regeneration successes, projects and initiatives.**
- **Practically, many officers reported vacant units in their boroughs to support Engaged** – however concern around high rent rates and lack of units in some boroughs equally may present a practical challenge.

Workshop Findings: Configurations

Workshop ideas around how Engaged might work across different boroughs suggest that overall:

- Reinstating existing **toilet blocks** and exploring potential **community toilet schemes** are still prevailing conceptual models
- Most boroughs reported a keen **interest in Engaged's concept of using vacant units**, particularly where they lacked potential toilet block options
- A **deconstructed version of Engaged**, where the shared-space activity is physically located away from the toilet provision could also hold potential
- Engaged could also exist as a 'mobile unit'
- Engaged should also explore possible configurations within green spaces and on higher building levels (not just ground floor)

Workshop Findings: Configurations

However, the largest number of comments relating to configuration, suggested that officers saw potential in Engaged being set up as part of ‘new developments’ in the borough (as opposed to existing vacant units). Comments related to:

- the potential for new developments to hold wider possibilities for what the shared-space activity might be - and how this might enable longer day / night toilet opening times.
- the chance to develop new toilets and/or host new activities that might be a destination in themselves.
- the possibilities emerging from being able to design, develop or build from scratch or for toilets to be planned in order to secure provisio.
- how new developments might be able to support sustainability or help with maintenance costs or responsibilities.

Workshop Findings: Shared space activities

Officers envisioned a wide range of activities working alongside public toilets within an Engaged unit with 3 equally weighted areas emerging:

- **BID or business-related activities – and particularly food-based businesses:** these seemed a natural starting point for drawing users, nurturing night-time economies and facilitating longer toilet opening hours.
- **Community-based activities:** to provide community support, e.g: as a space for training opportunities or youth support provision; to support vulnerable groups; as hub supporting alternating community provisions; and as a community engagement and research space.
- **Activities that present as a ‘destination’ in themselves:** a cultural destination (e.g. a gallery or event space); a destination enabling creativity; a tourist destination.

Only one officer envisaged Engaged potentially sharing space with ‘workspaces’.

Workshop Findings: Sustainability

Officers felt public toilets should be owned and maintained by councils and businesses *working in partnership* (opening survey).

However, finding ways to meet day-to-day maintenance needs and sustain Engaged over the long term were identified by officers as key 'practical' barriers.

Overall, officers could see these responsibilities equally being met by the owner (e.g. council); by developers' (e.g. written into contracts), or by those leading the shared space activity, in return for financial reward or incentive from the owner. Shared space activity leaders might be:

- local businesses
- community partners
- a foundation or charity (including 'meanwhile' spaces)

Given officers' keenness to involve and serve community groups within the shared space activity, incentives could also be non-financial (e.g. continued use of space in return for cleaning) – or – rent costs could be covered by (external) community group funders.

Workshop Learning

Via the closing survey, officer **comments around inclusivity appeared slightly more attuned to considerations around meeting accessibility needs within toilet provision**, including being family-friendly and meeting medical and disability needs. This may have been on account of our presentation on Engaged's concept and vision.

Comments on the workshop included:

"I loved learning about the different designs that can be cleverly incorporated responding to many concerns"

"[I've learnt that] it's possible to be more inspirational!"

Next steps: 'On The Ground'

Engaged is now working with one London Borough to look more in depth at what the opportunities and barriers are, on the ground.

This process involves:

- Mapping the current public toilet provision
- Understanding local development sites and the opportunities for public toilets
- Meeting and working with local people to know whose needs are not being met, and what a more inclusive toilet would look like
- Meeting and working with current and potential providers of public or customer toilets in the locality, to know more about the local challenges and possibilities for an Engaged model
- Sharing these findings:
 - locally with the public for wider feedback;
 - with the council to consider in future developments;
 - with local authorities, in particular regeneration officers, to address local toilet shortages through partnerships with local businesses and organisations.

Links & References

The Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design: <https://www.rca.ac.uk/research-innovation/research-centres/helen-hamlyn-centre/>

Public Toilets Research Unit: <https://www.rca.ac.uk/research-innovation/research-centres/helen-hamlyn-centre/public-toilets-research-unit/>

Toilets Innovation & New Knowledge Exchange (Tinkle): <http://tinkle.rca.ac.uk>

The Great British Toilet Map: <https://www.toiletmap.org.uk>

PiM Studio (Architects): <http://www.pim.studio>

Greater London Authority's *Designing London's Recovery* in association with CUSSH & LEAP:

<https://challengeldn.london.gov.uk/challenge/604645abc2dfcb001c1539f9>

Design Council: <https://www.designcouncil.org.uk>

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Hansard(2021) House of Lords, Non-Domestic Rating (Public Lavatories) Bill. H.L. Vol 811, col.432.

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2021-03-17/debates/90B02AA3-684B-4374-A2D1-22520CBFE582/details#main-content>