man on a mission to improve Britain's loos

Emine Saner

Poor accessibility, questionable hygiene, scattered needles and budget cuts … the UK is in the midst of a public toilet crisis. Thankfully, Raymond Martin is fighting back

'God said, "We need someone to do this job"' … Raymond Martin, director of the British Toilet Association, in Bangor, Northern Ireland. Photograph: Charles McQuillan/The Guardian

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The first thing Raymond Martin looks for in a toilet, he says, is cleanliness. Does the tissue paper on the floor mean this public lavatory has failed his inspection? "You have to understand that it's a working toilet, it's now mid-afternoon - a few bits of tissue on the floor is neither here nor there," Martin says. "If there were cigarette packets, bottles on the floor - that I'd be worried about." We're in Knutsford, Cheshire, and Martin is on a toilet-inspection tour of the north and west of the UK. He's just come from the Lake District and Blackpool. When we part ways in a

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couple of hours, he'll head on to Wales to inspect the public conveniences of Pembrokeshire.

Do people laugh when Martin, who is managing director of the British Toilet Association (BTA), tells them he does toilet inspections? They do, he says. "But then, immediately, they say, 'I'll tell you where I was and they had wonderful toilets ...'."

Martin loves the job - it takes him all over the country. And he really, really loves loos. He turns 70 this year and has started thinking about who may run the BTA whenever he steps down. He is, he says, "trying to find someone who has the passion for toilets". But before then, Martin is on what he calls his quest. "God or whoever said, 'We need somebody to do this job.' And I went, 'All right, I'll give it a go.'" Martin wants everyone to be able to use clean, safe and accessible public loos. Rather than a nice-to-have "convenience", he sees toilets as an essential part of public infrastructure.

The BTA is a members' association, funded by companies including those that design and build public toilets, so it's clearly in their commercial interests to have more public conveniences - but it's in our interests too. Since 2000, Raymond says the UK has lost about 50% of its public toilets. The figure is closer to 35%, according to Jo-Anne Bichard and Gail Ramster, accessible design researchers and authors of the book Designing Inclusive Public Toilets: Wee The People. (They have also created a Toilet Map of the UK's public loos.)

'It's about helping people, health and wellbeing, equality' ... Raymond Martin in his company car. Photograph: Charles McQuillan/The Guardian

A lack of toilets affects all of us, but especially those with disabilities, older people and those with chronic illness, including bowel and bladder problems. People have described not drinking enough (so as not to be caught short), soiling themselves in public, or not going out at all - the "urinary leash" that keeps people trapped at home if they don't know if they'll be able to access a loo. "It's about sanitation and hygiene," says Martin about his passion for public loos. "It's about helping people, health and wellbeing, equality, and it's just about making things right." Does he dream about toilets? He laughs. "Yes, I have to admit it."

When the Con-Lib coalition government introduced austerity in 2010 and cut councils' budgets, one of the first things many of them did to save money was close public loos. Since the BTA was set up in 1999, it has been trying to get the government to take toilets seriously (it also campaigns on other issues, such as the provision of sanitary bins in male toilets, and keeping an eye on loo-related issues, including schools restricting access during lessons).


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After the Covid pandemic, many of the toilets that were closed never reopened. When the levelling up and regeneration bill was announced, and a "toilet tsar" was suggested to oversee public convenience provision, the Conservatives rejected it. "[They said] nobody wants to be the Minister for Poo. Nobody wants to be the toilet minister."

Martin has more faith in the current government. Last year, he was invited to speak to Alex Norris, minister for building safety, fire and local growth. He took about 20 colleagues and partners, including representatives from disability groups and trade unions, to talk toilets - and he was back again three months ago. He hopes the government will make public loos a statutory requirement for councils (and provide the funding for it). "The government's very keen on safer, cleaner neighbourhoods, social inclusion and interaction, and rebuilding towns," says Martin. "Toilets are an absolutely essential part of this." Martin is confident for the first time in years that public loos will finally become obligatory.

A closed public toilet in Avonmouth, Bristol.
Photograph: Paul Hennell/Alamy

Over the course of a year, Martin will leave his home in Bangor, Northern Ireland, and visit about 600 toilets, including those in supermarkets and in pub chains such as Wetherspoon's, to check their condition, but also to give feedback on how they can be improved. This week, he will visit a random selection of nearly 50 public loos run by the company Danfo.

In one car park in Knutsford, there are three single toilets - "unisex cubicles are the way to go", says Martin - including an accessible one, which we look at first. "Number one: how easy the door is to open," he says. During our afternoon together, I notice he often says "number one", but doesn't always follow it up with a "number two" - but number ones, I suppose, are more common. He has a large number of checks to do, including the number of rails inside; that they're in the right position, and there's enough space for a wheelchair to turn. But the seat is about 2cm too low to be easily sat on by a wheelchair-user. "We'll make that recommendation to them."

A shelf would be useful, particularly for people changing a colostomy bag. Martin pulls the baby changing table down. "You're looking for stability," he says. "And sides so the child can't roll off it. Somebody's been in here, look." There are strands of tobacco on the table - the sign, he says, of someone rolling a joint. Sometimes, people will use the changing table for lines of cocaine, he adds. "Then you put a baby … It's something we have to be aware of." There is a sharps disposal hole, but cleaners still have to be aware that needles may have been hidden behind toilets. "Prick injuries, putting your hand around the back of the toilet to clean it."

"Working and clean and serviceable … that's my favourite kind of toilet

The built-in metal sink and dryer is in working order and virtually spotless, and there are two coat hooks: good. “The mirror is clean as a whistle. Lighting is good.” He sniffs. “No odour. It’s very hard to make this much better for a public toilet.” He’ll give it four stars - a grading system he has invented. “I’m trying to perfect it.” What might have pushed that up to a five? Perhaps a sanitiser for the seat, he says, “because you don’t know whose bum’s been on that last”. And one of the handrails could be screwed in a bit tighter, he adds.

In the small cafe next door, over coffee, Martin explains one way councils could pay for public loos. “You have a council toilet, but you have a coffee shop on the back of it, so these two work in symbiosis,” he says. “The rent from here will offset the cost of the toilets. You take a block of toilets, cut it in half, you put a shop in one side, and you put unisex cubicles in the other side. Around the country, we’re now starting to see things like coffee shops, tourist information centres … I think in one place there’s an art gallery.” As well as the government making toilets an essential, and providing money, “we also need to think about these new ideas, and community groups [running loos]”.

Martin can trace his interest in lavatories back to his time at school in the 60s, and a history teacher warning that one of the biggest threats to humanity was a pandemic, or antibiotic resistant germs. The importance of sanitation lodged in his mind, says Martin. As an adult, he went into sales, dealing in home appliances, then electronics, working his way up. But his life was about to collapse.

When Martin was 32, his wife died four days after giving birth to their second daughter. Years later, he discovered his wife had OTC deficiency, a rare genetic condition that affects how the body removes ammonia. (It also explained the earlier death, at two days old, of their first child.) “The doctors didn’t even know at that time,” he says. Martin was left with a one-and-a-half-year-old daughter, and a newborn to look after. “There were very difficult times for a lot of years,” he says, but he adds that he had a lot of support - nannies, a good friend and his family.

'Toilets are about health and wellbeing, but they're also about the local economy.' Photograph: Charles McQuillan/The Guardian

When his daughters were children, Martin became even more focused on hygiene and cleanliness, he says. As a single father, taking the girls to the loo was difficult. “I spent my time searching for toilets, and looking at toilets and going in and checking if they were all right to be used. The men’s toilets were despicable, in most cases.” He would often stand outside the women’s loos, which were the only facilities to have baby changing tables, then choose his moment to ask if he could go inside. “The next thing would be [a woman would say]: ‘Here, this bloke is going to change a baby’s nappy. Do you see this?’ I’d have a crowd around me.” This was 40 years ago, he says, when men were not really expected to do such things. Years later, he was, he says,

“one of the big drivers who got baby change tables in men’s toilets, and we’d like to see a lot more.”

In the early 90s, Martin started working for the campaign organisation Keep Britain Tidy. While assessing the cleanliness of beaches for Blue Flag status, he became even more interested in lavatories. “To get a blue flag, you expected toilets for visitors and you had to look after them,” he says. He became so recognised as a loo expert that he started working for the BTA in 2002, doing surveys for them at first, before taking over as managing director in 2014. It’s a voluntary role, though he gets paid for the surveys and consultations.

In that time, Martin has watched public toilets go down the pan. He understands the pressures - it costs about £15,000 a year to run a small block of toilets, he says - but says the money-saving was shortsighted as it meant town centres, and the businesses in them, started to suffer. “Toilets have a twin effect. Number one, it’s about health and wellbeing. But they’re also about the local economy.”

If we want to have thriving town centres, we need public loos, he says. The schemes where councils partner with local businesses to open their toilets to the public only go so far. “A shop opens at 9am, closes at 5pm. What do you do from 6am, when runners are out, dog walkers, postal workers, delivery drivers? What about the evening, when people want to go out? So you have to have council provision as well.” Truckers and delivery drivers shouldn’t have to urinate in bottles. “We know it happens - but it shouldn’t happen in a modern society.”

More kaput commodes in Merthyr Tydfil, south Wales. Photograph: Jeff Morgan 14/Alamy

The public loos in Knutsford charge 30p. It’s partly to pay towards the cost of upkeep, but it also reduces vandalism, says Martin. “Somehow we’ve got to get people to respect toilets. I don’t think they realise when they’re doing it, the effect [toilet closure is having] on older people, people with severe disabilities.” Are people open to paying? “No, is the answer. We all expect free toilets. I actually think they should be free, but reality sets in, and costs have gone up and we’ve got to fund them.”

We go across town to visit another set of public loos, which look great to my untrained eye. “Now, the criticism here is the white rails, because people with partial sight could have trouble seeing them,” says Martin. They should have had a band of dark tape put on them, for visibility. The rails on the baby change table could be higher, and the sink could be lower, but otherwise, Martin is happy. Four stars!

In his chatty way, Martin has been talking toilets for hours, from the lavatories shown at the 1851 Great Exhibition to the new glass cubicles Japan has introduced for its public toilets, to his hope that the UK will host the World Toilet Summit next year. On his tours of the UK’s toilets, are there

ones that stick in his mind? Does he have a favourite? “If they’re working and clean and serviceable,” he says “that’s my favourite kind of toilet.”

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