



When Nature Calls: A Public Health Case for Reforming Toilet Access in Schools

A briefing for the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC)

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The Public Health Issue

Restricted toilet access in schools is a significant but under-recognised public health issue. Practices such as prohibiting toilet use during lessons or locking facilities are contributing to avoidable health risks, distress, and inequality across England.

Research from the Toilet Talk project and national surveys shows widespread behavioural adaptation among pupils:

78% report avoiding school toilets

52% restrict fluid intake to avoid needing the toilet

These behaviours contradict core public health principles around prevention, dignity, and safeguarding.

Health Implications

Bladder and Bowel Dysfunction: Habitual withholding is associated with urinary tract infections, constipation, daytime incontinence, and long-term bladder dysfunction — increasing demand on primary care and carrying impacts into adulthood.

Menstrual Health Inequalities: Pupils report embarrassment when required to disclose menstrual status publicly, anxiety around limited facilities with sanitary disposal, and avoidance of toilets altogether. These factors undermine menstrual dignity and may contribute to school absence.

Pupils with Disabilities and Medical Conditions: Students with IBS, diabetes, bladder conditions, or neurodivergence face disproportionate distress when access is restricted. Requiring medical cards or public explanations further compromises privacy and dignity.



Systemic and Environmental Factors

Infrastructure and scheduling compound the problem: insufficient toilet provision, locked or poorly maintained facilities, missing sanitary bins, and break times too short to accommodate queues. These are modifiable environmental determinants of health.

Alignment with DHSC Priorities

Improving toilet access directly supports the prevention agenda, health inequalities strategy, safeguarding and child wellbeing commitments, NHS demand reduction, and menstrual health equity.



Recommendations

- 1. Cross-Departmental Guidance:** DHSC should work with Department for Education to develop statutory guidance prohibiting blanket bans on toilet use during lessons, routine locking of facilities, and establishing principles of dignity, privacy, and safeguarding.
- 2. Public Health Guidance for Schools:** Develop evidence-informed guidance on healthy bladder and bowel habits, fluid intake, menstrual health management, and privacy protections for pupils with medical needs.
- 3. Infrastructure Standards:** Review minimum toilet provision standards, ensure sanitary disposal across all Key Stage 2 toilets, and prioritise safety, cleanliness, and accessibility in environmental design.
- 4. Pupil-Centred Policy Development:** Develop a toolkit enabling pupils to contribute to local toilet policy, identify barriers, and co-develop solutions.

Further Action

Read more about [Toilet Talk](#) and our latest research, or the *Please Can I Go to the Toilet?* brief on eliminating barriers to school toilet access.

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