

Guidance for local authorities and other data holders on publishing open data about publicly accessible toilets

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Introduction

This document provides guidance for local authorities and others who want to publish open data about publicly accessible toilets¹ in their areas.

It has been developed by the London Assembly's Health and Public Services Committee through consultation and collaboration with developers, community groups and experts as part of review of public toilet provision in London.²

The purpose of the guidance is to enable those who hold data about publicly accessible toilets to publish it in a common format. This will make it possible for people to develop maps, websites and mobile applications to give people access to information about these essential facilities.

The guidance is intended to provide a standard format to assist people who want to publish open data. It is not mandatory in any sense, and it is not necessary to fill in the entire template if the data isn't available. The point is to provide a common structure for the data so that people can easily find and use data from multiple sources.

If all local authorities published open data about toilets in a standard format, comprehensive applications could be developed that would enable people to find suitable facilities, at no extra cost to the authorities themselves. There is also the potential for feedback mechanisms to be built in so that people, via smartphone and web applications, could augment the data already held by adding extra details, correcting errors, and possibly commenting on and rating facilities.

Why publish open data about toilets?

Many people, for a whole variety of reasons, rely on publicly accessible toilets. Areas where there are no appropriate facilities, or where there is no readily available information about existing facilities, are effectively inaccessible to many people.

The London Assembly's investigation into the provision of public toilets in London concluded that more could be done to enable people to find out what facilities are available.

Most local authorities publish some information about toilets in their areas. But they all do it in different formats, in different parts of their websites, and with different levels of detail included. Very few authorities publish the information as open data.

The lack of open data about public toilets means that although *some* information about publicly accessible toilets is theoretically public, in that it exists somewhere on the internet and possibly on a paper map, it is not very easy to find and it doesn't provide all the information that people need to help them find suitable facilities for their requirements.

¹ This includes council-owned toilets and all other toilet facilities that are available for public use, such as those that are made available through community toilet schemes

² For more information about the London Assembly and this investigation, please see the Assembly's website: http://www.london.gov.uk/assembly_investigation/public-toilets

For example, some authorities publish information about the accessibility of facilities, opening hours, charges and precise location data, whereas others only publish the name and directions to find facilities.

The lack of comprehensive open data also makes it difficult for developers to create accurate and useful maps, websites and mobile applications that would make the information much more accessible to people. There are already some smartphone applications to help people find toilet facilities. For example, www.toiletmapp.co.uk includes details of almost 1,000 toilets in the Greater London area. However, applications like this are not yet as comprehensive as they could be, because of the lack of comprehensive and accurate open data.

What counts as open data?

‘Open data’ is raw (ie unprocessed), machine-readable data that is published under an Open Government License³.

This guidance suggests that authorities should aim to publish as much data as possible about toilet facilities in their areas, under an Open Government License, using the attached template, in a spreadsheet format. This would comply with the two-star level of open data publication.⁴

The reason for this approach is that it could be implemented by all local authorities and other data holders within the existing competencies of organisations that have websites and at minimal cost. Where possible, authorities should consider taking further steps to make the data more open, for example by publishing it in a non-proprietary format such as csv,⁵ and using Unique Resource Identifiers to identify each facility⁶.

How to use the template

In order to publish open data about toilets, complete the attached template for each facility, completing all the fields where data is available, publish it on your website and notify any relevant data catalogue sites such as the London Datastore and data.gov.uk.

If not all the data is available at the outset, as it probably won't be in most cases, you should still use the template but leave fields blank as necessary. This will enable you to add further data in the future as it becomes available. This will mean that all the data will be in the same structure, which is important for those who wish to use data from several sources rather than just one local authority area.

The fields highlighted in yellow in the template are the essential fields, without which the data will really not be very useful at all. Beyond these essential fields, as much data as possible should be provided. The more data is provided, the more useful the data will be to a larger group of people.

The first two rows of the template indicate the type of data to be included.

³ <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>

⁴ See <http://lab.linkeddata.deri.ie/2010/star-scheme-by-example/>

⁵ There are several free online tools available that can be easily used to convert proprietary formats such as Excel into non-proprietary formats such as csv – advanced computer skills are not required.

⁶ For information about URIs, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uniform_Resource_Identifier

The next row, entitled 'vCard equivalent', provides the corresponding field name if the data is published or converted to vCards.⁷ This does not need to be edited or altered by data publishers.

The fourth row explains how the data should be formatted.

Acknowledgements

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A full list of those who contributed to the Health and Public Services Committee's wider review is included in the Committee's report, published on 5 July 2011.

⁷ These equivalents were kindly added by Andy Mabbett @pigsonthewing, per <http://pigsonthewing.org.uk/consultation-response-open-data-standard-public-toilets/> For further information about vCard, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/VCard>

⁸ <http://data.london.gov.uk/blog/wheres-loo-making-data-public-toilets-more-widely-available>

⁹ <http://ow.ly/4H4k8>