

## Petitioner submission of 22 March 2023

### PE1955/F: Make the provision of public toilets a statutory duty

Unfortunately it seems that after six months the Committee has yet to address the substance of the petition, namely that

"Public toilets are a basic requirement of public health and hygiene. They are also essential to protect the environment.

They are not just for visitors. They are needed by local people, emergency services, delivery drivers, care workers and others. This is especially true in rural areas."

The Scottish Government's initial response of 7 September 2022 does not address this. In fact, it seems it does not regard public toilets as of any importance at all. When I and other local people find ourselves clearing up the mess left by drive-through, supposedly self-contained, freeloading tourists, it is adding insult to injury. The Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund is not an appropriate source of funding for a basic public service needed by everyone, locals, tradesmen, health and care workers, delivery drivers, the elderly and menstruating women. Local authorities should not have to apply for tourism funds to maintain basic front-line services.

I therefore responded on this basis in my submission of 23 September, which seems to have been completely ignored by both the committee and the Scottish government.

The very reason for this petition - which in a single month, collected nearly 1500 signatures - was that the Highland Council simply does not 'prioritise budgets in line with the needs of communities'. In fact, it is closing and getting rid of public toilets in rural areas as fast as possible. Its comfort scheme has operated in Poolewe and Aultbea for some years, with the Council paying GALE ( local community enterprise) to manage them. However, year on year maintenance has been neglected and funding reduced until it reached a point in 2020 where the cleaner could no longer afford to continue, being on utterly inadequate wages and expected to provide her own cleaning materials. The toilets opposite my house closed just as the post-lockdown mass invasion of summer 2020 started. It was chaos.

Locals had to step in as volunteers to reopen them - for many months we were forced to combine the Gents and Ladies and were unable to open both. Now the Council is now seeking to transfer these facilities entirely to a community group, as it did in Kinlochewe and elsewhere, leaving communities to raise funding somehow for basic running costs and utility bills. These groups then find it almost impossible to work with the Council.

At Gairloch beach car park, a key location, the original public toilets were replaced with a portable unit some years ago, and this too has now been removed and responsibility handed to a small local group, who have found it almost impossible to build new toilets (apparently) owing to difficulties placed in their way by Highland Council. The site is still just a heap of rubble, as the tourist season gets ready to open.

It is clear that on this and other issues, Highland Council's budget priorities are clearly all in the Inverness area at the expense of rural areas. And non-statutory services are always the first to suffer budget cuts. Sadly, our local councillors - of all parties - have been frankly useless on this as on all other matters. Local democracy here is a complete sham.

Perhaps the Scottish Government is only now interested in funding urban areas? Does the 'City Regions' policy mean that the rural highlands are still seen as an exclusive, 'rewilded', depopulated playground for the wealthy? To locals, it certainly feels that way.

Comfort schemes are an unsatisfactory response. Local shops or businesses may be reluctant to provide toilets when their premises become invaded by coachloads of tourists who leave a mess and buy nothing. Funding is inadequate to cover costs, and such toilets in any case are often only open during limited hours.

The Committee's deliberations too have so far been extremely disappointing. If the Committee and the Scottish Government do not believe that public toilets are a basic requirement of public health and hygiene, surely they should say so publicly instead of beating about the bush in this way.

Please can the Committee actually address the petition itself. In Highland at least, experience shows that only a statutory duty and a sufficient revenue budget from the Scottish Government will provide this essential service in the rural areas. I said in my original petition,

"I am shocked by the apparent belief among politicians that toilets are just for tourists, and that self-contained, drive through tourists in campervans do not need them. We all need toilets, as does the environment. They are not an optional extra that can be cut to save money."

In my submission of 23 September, I said, "It is not acceptable for the Scottish Government to treat this issue with such casual dismissal"

This time I will just ask when the Committee will start to take my petition seriously and actually address the issue I raised.