

FEDAGA

Report on the Provision of toilet facilities on Edinburgh allotment sites (February 2022)

1. The need for toilets on allotments

The issue of toilet provision has been discussed by FEDAGA and also in conversation with plot-holders. The case for toilet provision is clear: plot-holders are on-site for 2-4 hours at a time and in that period there is often a need to relieve oneself. In the past, many plot-holders were men, content to “use a bucket in the shed” but nowadays many cultivators are women and families. Some are elderly. Moreover, not everyone has a shed and with the trend towards smaller plots it has become more difficult to find space for building one. Additionally, on some allotment sites, sheds are not allowed. Members of the public are invited to visit allotments for ‘Open Days’ with tea and cakes, but community involvement is severely limited without a presentable toilet facility. Off-site toilets have become few and far between. Many facilities have been removed from service or even sold by the City Council and demolished.

The data in the table below have been provided by Ian Woolard, CEC allotment Officer. For sites not in this list (at least 15) we assume there are no toilets at all. Where toilet provision exists, all except for two are of the ‘composting’ type requiring maintenance roughly every week. The maintenance comprises emptying and burying residues, cleaning, checking and replenishing hand wash and toilet paper. There are two sites which have ‘mains WC’ toilets on site.

Following an article about toilets in the FEDAGA Newsletter, several plot-holders have sent comments. Some sites are content with their composting toilet whilst others mention difficulty in finding volunteers to do the essential maintenance.

Site	Composting	Mains WC
Bridgend	not in use	no
Claremont	not in use	no
Craigentenny	not in use	no
Ferry Road	✓	no
Findlay	✓	no
Inverleith	not in use	no
Leith Links	✓	no
Midmar	✓	no
Redhall	✓	no
Restalrig	✓	no
Saughton x2	✓	no
Stenhouse	✓	no
Warriston	not in use	no

West Mains	no	✓
Victoria Park x2	no	✓

2. Recommendations

Based on discussions we have had, and information detailed below, we are able to make a few recommendations. Composting toilets seem more appropriate than mains WC as they consume less resources and are cheaper to install (unless there happens to be an existing sewer pipe nearby). A mains water supply poses problems when sub-zero temperatures in winter cause freezing (water is normally turned off December-May). The smaller composting toilets require considerable maintenance to dispose of the residues by burying deep in the soil but are appropriate for sites with just a few plots where willing volunteers are available.

For larger sites (in excess of 50 plots) the Natsol composting toilet is appropriate. It has two large vaults below ground and removing the residues is needed only every 1-4 years, depending on usage. These toilets are in use at many locations in the UK including allotments, churches and nature reserves. Below, we include two recommendations from existing users of the Natsol, and a gallery of images. Further information is on the company's website <https://natsol.co.uk/>.

From their website we have seen the Company's claims and our site visits confirm what they have said:

Natsol wheelchair accessible waterless and composting toilets are ideal for allotments, nature reserves, parks, churches, glamping & camping sites, golf courses, gardens and all sites without mains services. We provide guidance as to which model will best suit your application. Our stainless steel pedestals and glass reinforced concrete in-ground chambers are designed for long life and low maintenance. The vast majority of these odourless toilets require no mains services of any description. With no water; no power; no smell; no freezing risk and no chemicals, NatSol toilets are widely regarded as the best composting and waterless toilets available.

The basic unit, housed inside a simple cabin, with installation charges is likely to cost a little less than £10k. This needs to be investigated further in discussion with the company and local builders.

3. The Way Forward

Those few sites with water-closet flush toilets are content with what they have, although some plot-holders would like a closer-to-nature, more ecological facility. Other sites have various levels of provision from nothing at all to composting toilets of the type that needs frequent maintenance (in the spring and summer, maintenance is every week carried out by volunteers with shovels and spades). Smaller sites with willing volunteers might be well content with the *status quo*. Larger sites should consider moving to the low-maintenance Natsol composting toilet at a cost of around £10,000 including installation.

FEDAGA should engage with the Edinburgh Council to explore opportunities. It may be possible to fund such a project out of 'green' funds provided to encourage local food production, biodiversity, gender equality, help for disabled and ecological education.

We need to investigate the situation in other cities – we suspect Scotland has fallen behind England, and if so, this should be widely publicised.

Local site committees should place the issue of fundraising on their agenda, consider appointing a fund-raising committee member, and be prepared to lobby local politicians.

Appendix 1: Site reports from plot-holders (*verbatim*, anonymised)

Carricknowe The use of the golf club toilets is not a formal arrangement - even though they are also council buildings as it is a public course. No idea how many people use them - but I can find out. They are right at the allotment gates as we share the car park - probably another informal arrangement there that has never been questioned!

Stenhouse Composting toilet -we don't know how old our toilet is but we had to buy replacement parts for the mechanism in 2013. At that point it took a lot of work to find the part and it was the only one available in Europe so I am guessing it is pretty outdated.

The mechanism still works but part of the seat structure is broken and needs repair. The toilet is also slightly unstable on its base. Ian Woolard has had to refix the chimney on occasion after storm damage.

It is supposed to be maintained/cleaned by a rota of people who have keys, but it seems only a small number of people do anything. There are still occasions when it is left in the wrong configuration, which means the next person has to fix it or make a mess (occasionally). People who don't have a key, ie they haven't had training n how to use it get access via keyholders. The Liberty group have a key but haven't had individual training.

There is a concern that it could end up unusable.

Lethem Park Just to confirm that we do not provide toilet facilities at Lethem Park Allotment site. When we set up the site, our original proposal also included considerations for climate change and not to introduce further traffic congestion or parking problems to the area, as such we were keen to avoid plotholders driving to site as much as possible and to give priority to the local community for plots first. By taking on this approach it also reduced the need to include toilet facilities on site. With this in mind our waiting list operates differently to that of council run sites, where we allocate waiting list positions based on walking distance from home addresses.

With this set up 75% of our plotholders have less than 10 minute walk to their home for facilities (most are probably less than 5 minutes), 20% less than 20 minutes away and the

last 5% come from various areas across the city. Overall it only causes an issue for about 2% of our members.

However, if we were ever to expand, providing toilet facilities would potentially have to be reconsidered at that time.

Saughton Hi all. I'm at Saughton allotments. I mostly use a bucket in my shed, but now and again I need to use the composting toilet and am very glad of it. It's always clean and we'll kept. I'd be happy to help with its maintenance and emptying if required but I wasn't aware of requests for such help. Better ask a committee member when I next see them....

What a terrible shame the toilets that were made had to be shut! If the problem is just that there aren't enough, is that something the capital expenditure grant scheme could cover?

Surely the council should do the emptying? They seem to want more and more rent yet do less and less for it!

I am one of the two who look after the toilets at Saughton Mains. Originally they were wrongly installed. This led to the excess pee problem you describe. We downloaded the American manufacturer's instructions and found they should be installed with a drain to a soakaway which they call a French drain. Also originally one was marked Ladies and one Men. This made the poo in the mens too dry (the men use pee to activate their compost heap). Removal of the signs solved this problem. Regular inspection and emptying as required is important along with instructions to the users. The most important is to shut the lid after use. This aids evaporation and the smell goes up the vent too! Unfortunately our toilets are getting a bit worse for wear and will need replaced within a few years.

Pilrig Park Hello! I am responding in regards to the recent newsletter about the toilet situation. We don't have a toilet or a composting toilet at pilrig. We are overlooked as well. It's such a shame as I live a 15 min bike ride or car journey away. Please please can we have a toilet?!?!

Ferry Road We have a working composting toilet on site at Ferry Road which seems to be well used and well managed.

Leith Links I don't know much about the history of our composting loo. The front panel at the bottom but it still works. I believe we are getting a new loo paid for by the developers. However, I'm not sure if this is the case.

Redhall has a composting toilet of the same design as lots of others in Edinburgh. The roof was re-felted last year and the building is in good repair. It is maintained by a selection of volunteers including me on an informal non rota basis who empty the tray and sweep the floor etc. It is used by ploholders but has relatively light use as ours is quite a small site of approx. 40-45 plots.

Inverleith The composting loo was taken out by Ian about 10 years ago. I think it went to another site. We ran out of people to maintain it.

I really don't think they are fit for purpose but would like to investigate how we could use the existing buildings. There are loos that separate pee into a soakaway, we'd need a urinal for the chaps too but there must be a way of doing it to minimise maintenance and emptying.

I've used a loo at Kelburn castle whilst overnighing in a yurt that separated pee away and was simply a plastic bag in a bucket and sawdust to cover. Later dispose of the plastic bag and contents into landfill. Gloriously low tech.

A different opinion was "It would be great if this, in some sustainable form, could be re-instated."

Claremont Hello, the toilet at Claremont Park is out of use. There were difficulties accessing sawdust for it and also finding people willing to empty it.

Midmar (*A perspective from a female who was the primary carer and cleaner of this facility*)
As you know I have been involved for the last 3 years or maybe more. We have painted the toilet twice in that time trying to make it more inviting. Initially (anon) was reluctant to let me empty the toilet (he probably thought it was not the thing ladies do). However after a while I did the cleaning and emptying. The frequency of this escalated from emptying around every fortnight to weekly the risk being that it would overflow.

When cleaning (and it was Covid time) I used fairly harsh products for the floor and anti-bacterial/anti-virus sprays to clean the sink and the toilet and latterly the urinal. I always used disposable gloves and disposable cloths for cleaning keeping these separated between toilet and sink.

Initially I put up some signs to give people positive encouragement to look after the toilet also asking people to contact me if there were problems. Particularly during lockdown there was clear evidence of increase use of the toilet. Grandchildren went to spend time with their grandparents and children with their parents. However there was also clear indications that a number of middle aged men used this facility very regularly. There were clearly people whose need at times was of such urgency that they were not able to wait until I had finished the cleaning tasks. Clearly there are a number of women who also use it. I am aware there are also a number of disabled people at the allotment who would not be able to squat down or pee in a bucket.

Due to the increased frequency of needing to empty the toilet it meant that we were running out of space to bury the stuff and there had been insufficient time for it to start composting. Clearly it was still quite raw.

For those who do not know the emptying entails pulling the draw out which is on floor level lift it up(avoiding spillage) and taking this to the pre-dug hole. Can be heavy and very awkward to carry.

In general there were people(both men and women) who specifically thanked me for cleaning and emptying the toilet stating that they relied on this as they had to travel fair distances on public transport to get to the allotment.

I think it is essential to continue to evidence inclusion within the allotment and therefore it essential that we ensure that the facility continue to meet the needs of plot holders and their families.

Hope this is what you were looking for but let me know if there is anything else.

I also ensured that there were toilet rolls available and (anon)ordered wood chip/hemp on a regular basis.

Ps at the end I also made available a sanitary bin having discovered that some would put this in the toilet.

Warriston The Warriston toilet was in operation for only a short time following its installation several years ago. A composting affair, it was housed in a council-funded, purpose built hut at the gate which we are in the process of repurposing as a 'chipper' garage. Following initial enthusiasms for an onsite toilet, the realities of its management became clear—keep it clean and hygienic being the main and unavoidable issue. No one was willing to be a permanent toilet cleaner and expecting a site of approximately 150 plot holders to maintain high standards in outdoor conditions with no running water (sink, flush etc) transpired not to be viable on any front. Even if we had a fully flushing loo with a couple of cubicles and sinks with mains water and soap, we would still have the problem of who keeps it all clean and tidy on a day to day basis. As most plot holders are lucky enough to have personal shed facilities that cover most eventualities. Much more practical would be a fully maintained public toilet close by.

Suggestions from Stewart Swarbrick. On the issue of the toilets on the site, I can't recommend Joe Jenkins and his "Humanure Handbook" highly enough.

<https://humanurehandbook.com/>

You can download and read PDF copies of the book for free, there's a condensed version too.

I built a version of the "lovable loo" a few years ago as a stopgap until we got something better in place. It's made out of several stacked pallets, a toilet seat and several of the Kerbside Food Waste bins (they have a carry handle that locks the lid). I used what we had to hand at the time.

We have a dedicated compost heap that I empty the bins into once they're all full. The emptying takes about 10 minutes, including rinsing them out and propping them open to dry.

Unlike the handbook suggests, I'm not putting food scraps in, as there are enough concerns about Rats and Vermin on site. Instead I've been mixing the freshly cut grass in, as well as the occasional bag of spent coffee grounds when we get them. We've not harvested any compost from it this year, instead it keeps sinking down, which is fine by us, as it means we don't need to build another bay.

We're hoping to make some improvements to the toilet block over the winter - hopefully build a new, proper, lovable loo, take out the Sun Mar toilet as it's a pain in the proverbial to empty, and there's plans to put in a basic gravity fed, water hand wash unit - to take dirt off, then the hands can be sanitised.

The further step will be to experiment with heating the water using a compost pile - we've found that the piles of chippings heat up quite a bit after a few days. The goal wouldn't be to boil the water, but taking the chill off would be nice for over the colder, frostier days. Relevant video here from RED gardens: https://youtu.be/xh_731DFSy0

For soak material, we've just been using bags of woodshavings that are meant as Pet bedding from the Pet shop, as the sawdust has been removed and it's nice to handle.

Another suggestion that I've seen is Cat litter, and there is a type of litter that is basically compressed wood pellets.

<https://www.petsathome.com/shop/en/pets/pets-at-home-wood-pellet-non-clumping-cat-litter-30/>

Now a tip that I've seen online and been unable to properly compare, is that people have been using the Wood pellets meant for multi-fuel stoves in their Cat's litter trays as they're basically the same thing but cheaper, especially if you buy it in bulk.

This link is just an example.

<https://www.edinburgh-woodfuel.co.uk/product-category/woodlets-wood-pellets/>

What's infuriating, is that one shop lists it by volume, and the other lists it by weight.

I should probably take the luggage scales into Pets at Home and weight it to compare.

Another thing I don't think I mentioned, but an idea that came up in conversation when a representative from another allotment site was that, if you don't want to or can't compost the material, you can line the bucket with a couple of strong bin bags, just lift the whole thing out and put it in the bin.

If anyone finds this distasteful, think of all the nappies, incontinence pads and pet waste that goes into household waste bins.

It won't go into landfill - I think the Council is sending most of the non-recyclable waste to the incinerator at Millerhill.

<https://www.allaboutallotments.co.uk/allotment-toilets>

Appendix 2: Reports on the Natsol composting toilet

Mortonhall Golf Club (information supplied by a club member) The golf club had for many years required an on-course toilet and this became more pressing when we took on ladies as full members some 21 years ago. So in 2015 we agreed in principal to build a toilet. The location had to be central on the course and convenient from various golf holes. We had no suitable running water nor mains electricity nearby on our preferred site. Supplying these services was potentially going to cost us £30-40k. A septic tank would be an additional £8k. We therefore investigated composting toilets. I had already seen them in use in Norway and was impressed. We visited one in the Borders near Traquair and contacted various organisations who used them, including a community garden project in Glasgow. All reports were very favourable.

We also wished the toilet to be functional in all seasons, vandal proof and eco friendly.

NatSol seemed to be the leading supplier in the UK.

We decided that the basic NatSol box wasn't aesthetically pleasing, so engaged the services of one of our architect members to create a bespoke building.

The basic box was £7,200. We opted for a timber building, with an area for shelter, which cost circa £45k. There were additional costs, such as architect's fees, structural engineer, quantity surveyor, building control, environmental assessment fees, rock cutting etc. In total, it cost us £55k. If you wished something simpler, you would have some additional fees to the basic box but wouldn't amount to much.

The facility has been well received. An initial concern from the ladies was that it would smell. In fact, that was soon dispelled and they think normal WCs are smelly but not ours. The green staff clean it twice a week. Hand gel is provided for hand sanitisation. Every few months they spread out the solid contents within the chamber. We have, to date, not needed to empty it. There is a urinal provided for male use and urine drains away from that and the main toilet pan to a soak-away.

Aldouran Wetland Garden in Leswalt, Dumfries and Galloway We visited these gardens and have looked at, and used, the Natsol. Our family of younger adults and children also used them. We were impressed with the design.

We contacted someone who was involved in the management of the gardens to find out more. She replied:

"As for the composting toilet - it was supplied by a Welsh company called Natsol- www.natsol.co.uk. Telephone 01686 412653. They were very professional and very helpful with instructions for building and using the toilet as well as instructions for composting. We have had it in place since 2017 and as yet have had no need to empty a chamber for

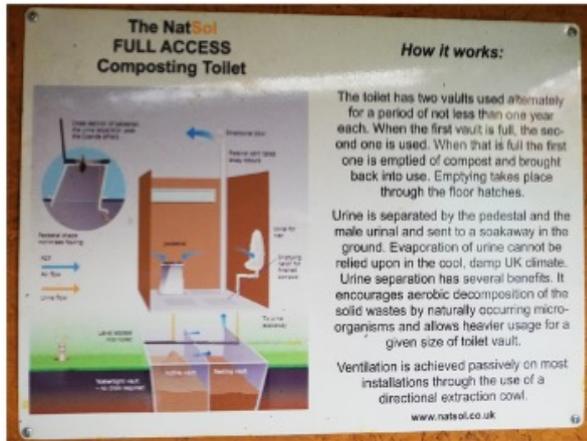
composting. We also have had no problems with odours at all. We have a local builder who lives in the village and who built the toilet for us using the instructions supplied by Natsol. Natsol told us that planning permission is not usually required but we had to ask for it here. Best to check.

We have been extra careful during Covid 19 to ensure it is kept clean and sanitised. We have a rota of volunteers who volunteer on a weekly basis to check everything out occasionally during their allotted week, including the toilet and it has worked well. Natsol provided the first bag of wood shavings and the dispensers for the hand sanitisers and sanitising fluid were also provided. We found them an excellent company to deal with.

The total cost was £7,106.”

Scroll down for images

(Document compiled by John and Liz Grace, January 2022)



Images of NatSol loo at Aldouran Wetland Garden in Leswalt, Dumfries and Galloway. The top left-hand picture shows how it works: there are two underground 'vaults', one decomposing whilst the other is being filled with excreta. Urinals drain to a soakaway.

Note added 18th Fenruary 2022