

COMPOSTING TOILETS

Getting a New Toilet at Gordon Road Allotments – A Case Study

Gordon Road Allotments in Finchley, London N3, is a statutory site owned by the London Borough of Barnet with about sixty plot holders. The whole site is leased to the Finchley Horticultural Society (FHS) which manages all aspects except maintenance of gates, fences, roads and water pipes which the Council manages. The Council sets the plot rent, of which 50% is passed to the Council and 50% retained by the FHS.

The Chemical Toilet

For many years the Council supplied a portable chemical toilet which was replaced by a commercial supplier every month. The council paid for the chemical toilet during the summer six months but the FHS chose to keep it throughout the year and pay the extra. The cost of the toilet was about £1,650 per year.

Motivation for Change

In the winter of 2007/08 the Council announced that it would no longer pay for toilets on leased sites. This would cause a financial difficulty to the FHS whose biggest fund raising event (a plant sale) produced about the same profit as the annual cost of renting a chemical toilet. The immediate trigger for action was financial. But we had been aware that the chemical toilet was about as environmentally unfriendly as it could be. And with its high step it was difficult to use for less able people and impossible to access for anyone in a wheelchair. Informal discussion with a sample of plot holders showed a clear desire for a toilet on site throughout the year. People appreciated that this was important to encouraging women, families and elderly people to garden an allotment. It was also important to the FHS's on-site social events which had done so much to strengthen our Society in recent years.

The Working Party

In the summer of 2008 the FHS's site committee established a small working party to investigate the options and make recommendations. The Working Party was founded on the basis that it would seek an environmentally and disability friendly solution as well as one that was affordable for the FHS. It met twice in August and September 2008 and at its first meeting it decided:

- (a) To seek a long term solution rather than short term expediency
- (b) To seek low running costs, both cash and labour
- (c) Principles (a) and (b) may imply higher capital costs and these will be acceptable especially if the WC is paid for by a grant.

The Working Party stated in its report to the FHS that it was moving ahead on the assumption that it will be successful in raising the funds for a new toilet and will make no demand on the Society's existing funds.

The Research

The Working Party surveyed the amount of use of the chemical toilet and confirmed its estimate that this was equivalent to 1-2 people. It also investigated the following options:

<i>Water Flush</i>	Mains sewer drainage	<i>Waterless (Composting)</i>	Rotaloo
	Cess pit		Natsol
	Septic tank		Enviroloo

The Working Party looked at the alternatives of a standard cabin or a purpose built cabin, and construction by a contractor or by FHS plot holders. Members of the Working Party visited a Natsol composting toilet on the Friern Barnet Central allotment site and visited Kazuba's London agent to view an Enviroloo composting toilet. We considered the issue of urine separation.

The Working Party rejected the mains sewer solution because of the high costs and because the two statutory authorities required a non-returnable deposit of £783 before they would provide a quotation for their work. It dismissed the cess pit and septic tank drainage options on the grounds that we were unlikely to get permission from the Environment Agency, they were likely to be expensive to install and maintain, and in the case of the septic tank we doubted whether it would be technically satisfactory on the Gordon Road site and it would require a very large area of allotment land for the soak away.

The Report

In early October 2008 the Working Party produced a seven page research report for the FHS which included the following:

"When we looked at the results of the research we provisionally concluded that we should choose a composting toilet, specifically the Enviroloo SC-2040, with a standard cabin and all to be installed by the supplier for an estimated £6,768. It will be wheelchair accessible. The Enviroloo toilet requires no water, electricity or drainage. Hand cleaning will be by wipes or gel. The toilet will need to be kept clean and furnished with toilet paper and hand cleaner. Every year or two it will need emptying of the compost which can safely be put around fruit trees or bushes but not directly on crops. All of this maintenance is well within the capacity of the plot holders.

We are aware that some people think of composting toilets as smelly unhygienic places they would not wish to use. We think this objection does not apply to any of the composting toilets we have reviewed, but the working party will be gathering further information on the Enviroloo and practical experience of composting toilets. We are also aware that some people think that the idea of emptying a composting toilet as totally repugnant. We believe that there is no reason why this need be the case when the material is fully composted."

Fund Raising

Following acceptance of the report in December 2008 we applied to Awards for All, part of the National Lottery, for £8,876 which included new stopcocks for the site and a water supply to our newly constructed indoor meeting room. This was the only funding application we made and it was successful, the payment arriving at the end of January 2009.

Planning Consent

Except for a completely portable chemical toilet, all toilets require planning permission and we applied. Allotments are classed, like horticulture, as an agricultural use and there was a slight delay while the planning department obtained the right forms – there isn't much agriculture in Finchley. We applied in late February 2009 and the fee was £170 which we had allowed for in the grant. The application was made on a form for "Application for prior notification of agricultural or forestry development – proposed building" and the planners put this application through on a fast track, permission arriving after three weeks in mid March 2009.

Landlord's Consent

Also in late February we applied to the Council for landlord's consent. This took a disgraceful thirteen weeks and we were even asked to conduct a public consultation! All of this was for a hut of the same size and materials as the many tool huts on the allotment site but better designed. It seemed the main thing they were concerned about was that no nearby resident should complain to a Councillor that they could see a toilet. The public consultation took the form of a letter to the six

nearest houses informing them of our proposals and asking for comments. Three residents responded, all very supportively, two of them being plot holders.

The Installation

We ordered the toilet in mid May 2009 and it was installed in mid June by the supplier, Kazuba, and their builder Michael Tye Limited, a small company which specialises in environmental construction. For various reasons the work was not completely finished at that time and two further visits resulted in the supplier completing his work in mid August. Members of the working party added finishing touches such as sealing the concrete floor, writing and displaying instructions for use, fixing the hand gel dispenser, coat hooks, a shelf and a toilet brush, the latter being chained to the cabin so that it could not fall into the vault! We have installed a solar powered light and will soon complete the planting in the adjacent bed we created. The new composting toilet came into use at the end of August 2009 and the chemical toilet was removed. The whole project lasted about a year.

Other Experience

Three other allotment sites in the London Borough of Barnet had installed composting toilets before Gordon Road. Friern Barnet Central and Lawrence Street sites had installed Natsol units, Friern Barnet Central installing one unit on each of its two sites. East Finchley, a long narrow site had installed two Enviroloo units with KL1 cabins, these are smaller than Gordon Road's KL2 cabin and do not have wheelchair access.

Lessons Learned

(a) Funding and Installation Some sites have paid for composting toilets from their own funds and some have made very considerable savings on our costs by plot holders with construction skills installing the unit. Although it took us longer, by raising the funds we protected the FHS's assets and having done that it made no difference to raise a larger sum to also pay for the installation. We are glad we did so because we had plenty of things to do without installing the unit.

(b) Water Works Nor did it make any difference to the funding application to add in the new stopcocks and the new all-year-round water supply. These had environmental and disability advantages and so tied in quite well with the reasons for the new toilet.

(c) Consultation We were glad that we took the trouble to re-assure the plot holders that the composting toilet would not have flies or smells, and to explain why we needed a change and what the advantages would be. We also took care to ensure that the site committee and the FHS main committee and its Officers knew what was happening, were party to the decisions, and fully understood the contractual and financial risks.

Further Information

Andrew Brown a.brown@cvni.org.uk will supply further details to allotment societies on request.

The Allotments Regeneration Initiative publishes free information on its website about composting toilets for allotments with excellent links to other information including suppliers and funding.

<http://www.farmgarden.org.uk/ari/resources/ari-factsheets.html>

Awards for All <http://www.awardsforall.org.uk/index-england.html>

Kazuba UK <http://kazuba.eu/index.php>