

TOILETS IN THE MEADOWS AND BRUNTSFIELD LINKS

Forgive me for lowering the tone slightly, but I'd like to talk about toilets. This topic was one that came up in two budget responses which I helped to compile: that of Friends of the Meadows and Bruntsfield Links, and also that of the Edinburgh Health Forum, both of which I chair. I am also a member of Tollcross Community Council. My name is Heather Goodare. I have brought with me Dr Peng Lee Yap, a former Convener of Friends of the Meadows.

Obviously we all appreciate the problems of budget restraint, and we have made many suggestions for ways to economise. But my aim today is to focus on one particular issue that was only mentioned generally in the report made to the Finance and Resources Committee that of the proposed closure of toilets outside the city centre. I have not been able to establish conclusively whether or not this includes the toilets on the Meadows and Bruntsfield Links. If it does, I would plead with you all to reconsider. I don't suppose anyone wants local toilets to be closed, certainly not those at Portobello beach, but I can only speak for the Meadows.

Edinburgh is a wonderful capital city, and during the summer particularly attracts visitors from all over the world. Not to have public toilets on the Meadows would surely seem to our international visitors to be bizarre in the extreme. Do we really want public urination on the Meadows? As it is, during peak times in the summer, at the height of the barbecue season, when people tend to drink alcohol to excess, public urination is a problem: and it's not only men who do it. In fact we need one more toilet on the Meadows, which should be accessible for disabled people: we really can't afford to lose those few we have.

These toilets are used throughout the year, not just in the summer. According to the Council's own survey, the toilets at the south end of Bruntsfield Links, which are those most heavily used, account for up to 400 visits a day in summer from gentlemen and 300 from ladies. In winter it is less: but still up to 150 a day for gents and 100 a day from ladies. The other toilets are still well used: those at the Hope Park end of the Meadows, up to 350 a day for gents in summer (250 a day for ladies), and even those in Middle Meadow Walk near Lauriston Place, which have no disabled access, have up to 250 a day for gents and 150 a day for ladies in summer: proportionately less in winter.

A small party of committee members from Friends of the Meadows, including myself, carried out a toilet inspection on 1st December 2014. We found that the toilets were on the whole well maintained, though the gents' at the Hope Park end was out of order owing to fire damage. Apparently it is still closed, and will not be repaired by Property Care until a decision is made by the Council about permanent closure of toilets in general. It would of course be pointless to repair it if it is about to be closed.

When we were there a youngish man was desperate to use the toilet. He had been on a walk up Arthur's Seat, and had come back into town: this was the first public toilet he came across, only to find it was closed. He was on a visit from Glasgow. We took pity on him, and stood guard while he used the ladies' toilet. On the face of it, he was the kind of person who could have visited a local pub: *but he was looking for a public toilet!* And this was at the beginning of December.

We think it would be a disaster for the Meadows if these toilets were permanently closed. In fact we need one more, as I said earlier. There used to be one at the cricket Pavilion, and the drainage is there: this site needs to be investigated, and the possibility of rebuilding, to include disabled access, considered seriously. The Meadows and Bruntsfield Links constitute a Premier Park and also a Millennium Park. They provide the fresh-air lungs of the city, and are well used for sport and general recreation. They are a huge tourist attraction. Students and children use them a great deal, and would be stumped without toilets.

To conclude, it is simply inconceivable that the Council should be serious about closing these toilets. Ideally they should remain free to use, but if this is totally out of the question, consideration could be given to making a small charge, though this would be unpopular. People would soon get used to the idea that when out, they need to carry an appropriate coin, just as disabled people need to remember to take their special key with them. It would be particularly discriminatory against disabled people to remove these facilities, which are often very hard to find elsewhere. In fact it might well be illegal, as it would run counter to the Equality Act 2010. It is simply unrealistic to suggest that mothers with young children, or indeed children on their own, should seek toilets in the local pubs and cafes. Similarly, single old ladies could well be reluctant to do so. It must also be pointed out that the Pavilion Cafe has only one very small unisex toilet, which can only be used by staff and customers and cannot be made available to the general public. The cafe is not open during the winter.

At the public meeting of Friends of the Meadows and Bruntsfield Links last autumn there was a unanimous vote that the public toilets here should not be closed. It is extremely important that the Council should be aware that if they are, there will be a complete loss of faith in the Council on the part of our members. We do a good deal of voluntary work on the Meadows, in some instances rectifying the damage done by Council vehicles to grass verges. We have recently been joined by an enthusiastic group of student volunteers from Edinburgh University, who have greatly enhanced the scope of our work. We usually work together very happily with Council staff to improve the environment generally, and we have ambitious plans for the future. We don't want this good working relationship to be undermined in any way. Apart from anything else, where would we go to relieve ourselves when doing our voluntary work? Some of us old ladies need to go more often than we used to - and you don't want to stop us doing the weeding, do you?

I hope very much that the Council will ensure that these toilets are kept open, and indeed improved, so that we can continue to work together to maintain these wonderful open spaces. At a time when obesity is a major public health problem, costing 'Britain's economy £47bn a year, more than war, terrorism or armed violence' (research by McKinsey and Co reported in the *Independent*, 20 November 2014), the provision of outdoor sporting facilities is an essential ingredient in the maintenance of a healthy population. Indeed, exercise is actually prescribed by GPs for both mental and physical health. So-called savings made here will surely impact adversely in the long run on Health and Social Care budgets. Closing the public toilets will make these wonderful green spaces less attractive and less useful to both visitors and residents, and will surely not be cost-effective. I appeal to you to keep them open.