

Reflections a Year after Democracy Matters Consultation:

Summary

A Democracy Matters consultation was held on January 25th 2024, with 12 participants from Glasgow Allotments Association. It offered an opportunity to consider how, in the future, small self-organising groups like allotment associations can work in a co-operative, participative way with a focus on developing democracy at their local level.

The main themes identified during the discussion were on the powers of associations to nurture their own communities' capabilities. It was decided to concentrate on three aspects of "Growing a Good Allotment Community" in a series of visits hosted by participating associations for further conversations with participants and their fellow plotters. The outcomes of these visits would be followed up with a cross Glasgow workshop open to all GAF members at a later date.

The heading for the group's focus is **Growing A Good Allotment**. The three themes that emerged during the five meetings held over 2024 are identifying and sharing experience and practices for:

1. Good governance
2. Ways of engaging plotters with the site as members of the community.
3. Developing effective community resources on site .

The GAF AGM in November agreed **Next Steps** with a further 3 sites hosting visits in 2025 that include lunch and a conversation on one of the specific topics, identified from this year's conversations. There will be an open GAF Event in April or May where those who were involved in the original conversations describe the issues and the variety of approaches that different sites have adopted to tackle them. We hope this will lead to further discussions that tease out problems, responses and attitudes and recommend possible actions.

Development of the Growing a Good Allotment Community conversations.

Over the last year there were 5 meetings to identify the needs of the association members, share experiences and information and decide on future actions.

Every allotment site is different and each contributed their different ideas and practices in relation to their own particular experiences. Members of 16 different sites across Glasgow City participated. The format used was that sites hosted a conversation starting with a tour of their site, followed by lunch and a discussion. There were also individual contacts and visits outwith the general meetings.

The experiences and needs that are emerging are

- (I) Committee members are concerned about the governance of the sites. Although they have Constitutions, many are run on 'custom and practice'. There was a wish to share policies and procedures particularly for plot inspections and implementation of rules.
- (II) It is often difficult to find committee office bearers and involve other members in activities but there was a recognition that plot-holders may want to escape from stressful working lives and just cultivate their plot. However, while they do not want to join the committee many are willing to contribute to clean ups and maintenance, support open days and attend social functions. Committees tend to be good at the 'hardware' - maintenance, membership and implementing rules but less good at the social software of creating a warm and supportive association. The group shared ideas about how new members can be introduced into the community and whether having a social secretary who finds out what best engages their members enthusiasm would help an association to respond to plotters' interests and skills etc.
- (III) Sites vary widely on their resources both for the human inhabitants and for the rest of the natural world. Some have community huts and even play space for children; shared composting facilities and meeting spaces. Some sites are wildlife friendly with rich boundary hedges, ponds and orchards. Again, sharing ideas and information is proving very useful.

Connections with the Report from the Democracy Matters

The policy document reviewing the effects of the 2015 Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act (CEA) on developing local democracy states:

“Overall, the key message was that while there is support for greater community decision-making in Scotland, participants also highlighted multiple considerations that need to be addressed to ensure a new layer of decision-making in Scotland works effectively.”

We believe that allotment associations are an example of self-organising voluntary groups who take responsibility for decision making in their community. The 32 allotment sites in Glasgow are an important, though often unrecognised, part of the local community. Glasgow City Council acts as landlord for the 26 sites on land which they own or lease. Under Section 9 (allotments) of the CEA the Council has a duty to provide allotments to all Glasgow residents who request a plot (land of 250sq m or less if requested by the applicant). This legislation puts allotments in a different and specific category from other provision on Council land such as play parks, sports pitches, etc.

What has happened in relationship with the Council

** Greater involvement in service delivery*

Participants described a desire for communities to have more control over a wide range of public services. However, it was not always clear whether communities wished to have complete control of these services or simply to have a greater say in decision-making and priority-setting.

The Council has consulted and then passed new Rules and Regulations. There is concern about how these will be implemented and the responsibilities of associations if the secretary becomes an ‘agent’ of the Council. Most associations are un-incorporated and it is not clear how this will affect the democratic structure of the associations and whether they will have to be incorporated. In the future if the Council works with GAF rather than approaching sites individually it is hoped that a consensus and support mechanism will evolve.

The strategy for new allotments and support of existing ones is contained in the Food Growing Strategy and this sits under the umbrella of the Glasgow Food Plan although this is administered by the Glasgow Food Partnership. Again working with GAF the expertise of members of allotment association members could be explored but this would require a change in attitude and capacity building for Council officers and association members.

Conclusion

The rich have their gardens and the poor have their allotments. While a garden is totally the concern of the owner an allotment is part of a ‘commons’. The individuals tend a patch of earth but they have to live with the rest of the people on the site, the local community and, for most associations, with a land owner. How they work together affects the happiness and wellbeing of all parties and therefore exploring and developing these relationships contributes to the development of democracy in our society.

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