OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 7 June 2022

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Tuesday 7 June 2022

CONTENTS

LOCAL GOVERNMENT, HOUSING AND PLANNING COMMITTEE
18th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)
Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)
*Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP)
*Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Amy Alcorn (Scottish Borders Council)
Marina Curran-Colthart (Argyll and Bute Council)
Peter Duncan (Fife Council)
Sinclair Laing (Aberdeen City Council)
Paul O'Brien (Association for Public Service Excellence)
Sandy Paterson (Glasgow City Council)
Wayne Priestley (Association for Public Service Excellence)
Ian Woolard (City of Edinburgh Council)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Euan Donald

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 7 June 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:35]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Ariane Burgess): Good morning, and welcome to the 18th meeting in 2022 of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. We have received apologies from Willie Coffey, Annie Wells and Mark Griffin. I ask all members and witnesses to ensure that their mobile phones are on silent and that all other notifications are turned off during the meeting.

The first item on our agenda is to decide whether to take items 3 and 4 in private. Do members agree to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Allotments

09:36

The Convener: The next item on our agenda is to take evidence on the impact of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 on allotments and community food growing. This is the second of three evidence sessions that the committee is holding in its inquiry on the issue. Today, we will discuss the topic with two panels of witnesses representing local authorities and the Association for Public Service Excellence, which is known as APSE.

I welcome our first panel of witnesses, who are Peter Duncan, allotments officer with Fife Council; Paul O'Brien, chief executive of the Association for Public Service Excellence; Wayne Priestley, principal adviser with APSE; and Ian Woolard, allotments officer with the City of Edinburgh Council. Paul O'Brien and Wayne Priestley are both joining us remotely.

It would be helpful if members could direct their questions to a specific witness where possible, although I will be happy to bring in others if they wish to contribute. If witnesses wish to comment, please indicate your desire to do so to me or the clerk and I will bring you in at an appropriate point. I would be grateful if Paul O'Brien and Wayne Priestley could indicate that they wish to come in by putting an R in the chat function in BlueJeans.

I will open the session with a question that is directed to Peter Duncan and Paul O'Brien. I am interested to hear how much it costs to provide allotments. How have council budgets for allotments and community growing changed since the act was passed in 2015?

Peter Duncan (Fife Council): The cost for allotments in Fife depends on the area of land, what surrounds that land, whether it is already fenced and so forth. Fencing is a major expenditure, but it might be an existing walled garden, which we have in Fife. On average, pre-Covid, to provide a plot for a grower in Fife, with a six by four shed that keeps the planning people happy—it keeps window frames and doors out of the equation and keeps things a bit tidier—the cost was in the region of £1,000. That included contributions for fencing and communal resources, and the shed made up £400 of that. The sheds have a water collection system on them, which obviously has a knock-on effect on future maintenance bills. However, post-Covid, the cost for the same facility could be anything between £1,500 and £2,000, which is crippling projects at present.

The Convener: Just to clarify, in Fife, do you provide a shed for people?

Peter Duncan: Yes. Going back 11 or 12 years, we had a discussion with planning officers and the biggest fear from elected members was that we would build more "shanty towns"—those were their words. Because some of our sites are in B listed structures and so on, if we provide the shed, that gives some continuity in the structures across sites and satisfies the planning department. Equally or more importantly, it is a social leveller, because everybody can come along and have a shot at horticulture. Obviously, the biggest expenditure in doing so is the shed. We therefore have a three-tier pricing structure in Fife. It is 45p a square metre if there is a shed. Basically, that extra income allows us to refelt and maintain the building over a five-year period. The average cost in Fife is 30p a square metre for a site without an individual shed.

The Convener: Thanks for that clarity.

Paul, do you have a bigger-picture sense of the cost of allotments?

Paul O'Brien (Association for Public Service Excellence): Yes. Our figures tell us at a United Kingdom-wide level—we have monitored the situation over the past 15 years or so by surveying local authorities across the UK—that the most common price for a 250m^2 plot is about £70 per annum. The figures show that more than 50 per cent of authorities are now charging over £50 a plot per annum.

We are also seeing on-going cost rises, which I suppose are a result of the general rises in the cost of living and inflation. More than 40 per cent of local authorities suggest that they intend to increase costs on an on-going basis over the next two to five years, and another 32 per cent are reviewing those costs at present. Quite a substantial number of authorities are looking to increase costs. That is a result of local authority budgets continuing to tighten and the ability to continue to subsidise plots diminishing. We are seeing a long-term trend of a shift towards trying to break even on the provision of plots.

The Convener: I might have missed something there. The £50 per plot per annum is a charge to the plot holder. Does that money go back into the provision of new allotments? One issue that we are beginning to understand is that there are long waiting lists and not enough plots. What is the cost of providing allotments?

Paul O'Brien: The cost is for the maintenance and upkeep of the plots. We are also seeing an increase in demand for plots, as you rightly point out, convener. Local authorities are responding to that by trying to increase the number of plots available. That is sometimes about repackaging sites as smaller plots and cutting them up in different ways, but it is also about trying to find additional land to create further plots. The cost that we are talking about is the cost of maintaining plots and allotments.

The Convener: Okay, but we do not have any clarity about the budget for creating new allotments.

Paul O'Brien: Authorities have limited budgets available for new allotments. They are making no surplus from the upkeep costs—they are still subsidising those or are trying to break even. New plots sometimes come from developers through new housing developments and so on. There is evidence that suggests that another way of providing new plots is for local authorities to repurpose land and increase the number of available plots.

We have seen some evidence that, although there is an increase in demand, the waiting lists are starting to diminish a little and the waits are not as long. That is right across the board—I am not talking about individual authorities. There is an increase in demand, but the waiting time seems to be reducing a bit.

09:45

The Convener: Ian, do you want to come in?

Ian Woolard (City of Edinburgh Council): Yes. Similar to what Peter Duncan said, the cost of plots in Edinburgh is a bit higher just now. The proposed extension at Victoria park involves 16 plots and a few raised beds, and the cost of that is just over £50,000, so we could be looking at as much as £3,000 per plot for that location. However, there are differing locations around the city.

In Edinburgh, we charge a bit extra for plots. The proposed fee for next year is £138.50 for a full plot, which is quite expensive—it could be the most expensive in Scotland. I would not say that the waiting lists are diminishing. In Edinburgh, they are certainly increasing and are not showing any signs of going away.

The Convener: Is £138.50 more than is needed? Can you put any of that towards new plots, or does it pretty much cover the maintenance?

Ian Woolard: Any new plots would probably come from capital money for which, of course, the council would incur a long-term debt. In Edinburgh, the income that we generate from allotments is just over £100,000 so, as a one-man service, we probably just about break even on the revenue costs and the day-to-day running costs, which is probably quite pleasing to my bosses.

Wayne Priestley (Association for Public Service Excellence): The charge per allotment

plot often depends on the facilities that are on the site. You can have an absolute blueprint site that has water, electricity and all the facilities such as community huts and composting toilets—you name it. There can be five-star allotment plots, but many sites are quite small. The £70 average that we see can reflect a site that is basically just a plot of land and nothing else. That is why there is such variation. I think that the Edinburgh site, at those prices, is probably a premier site with lots of facilities.

Interestingly, we have a report that shows that 50 per cent of local authorities are subsidising the cost of allotments and probably about 45 per cent are just about breaking even. There is no money in providing allotments. It very much boils down to whether the council has the resources available to do it. Many councils now cannot afford new sites, so they are looking at the size of their existing plots and considering halving or quartering them. They are saying to people who have multiple plots, "We're desperate for sites, so can we have some of your plots back?" Historically, some people have had two, three or four plots.

Some councils are looking at digging up paths or reducing the size of composting storage areas to get new plots in. There are all sorts of ways that councils are looking to keep down the cost of providing more allotments by utilising what they currently have.

Many new plots are smaller, because families are saying that they do not want massive plots the size of a football pitch; they just want enough to be able to feel that they have a healthy lifestyle, can involve the children and get some home-grown products. What we are seeing from our results is that it does not always have to be about new sites.

The Convener: You have touched on the main barriers, and we will want to explore that area a bit more. We are beginning to bring out those issues. Clearly, allotments provide a lot of benefits for people. It is not just about food; in our session last week, we touched on the benefits for mental health and wellbeing. The conversation this morning has shown that cost seems to be the main barrier. Is identifying sites also an issue?

Peter Duncan: With regard to sites, recognition is getting better. From a local authority perspective, senior officers in other council departments should recognise the importance of community growing and what it brings to the table. We have seen its importance, especially in the past two years.

In relation to what Wayne Priestley said about realignment, we have to be careful that we do not do a chopping-up exercise that leaves us with postage stamp sized plots. In Fife, we operate with three sizes, which allows people to go up or down internally if they wish, when their circumstances change.

Our biggest hurdle is people not knowing what to do. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 mentions training, but that flies under everybody's radar. We are very good at creating kitchens for cooking stuff, but if you cannae grow it, you cannae cook it. That is the way that it works.

The Convener: Absolutely. That is a very good point.

You said that there are three sizes in Fife. Could you say a bit more about that?

Peter Duncan: Yes. In the 2015 act, the recognised size is 250m^2. However, with my hand on my heart, I can say that probably about 10 per cent of our total supply is at that level or above. We have found that areas of 200m^2, 100m^2 or even 50m^2 more than suffice. Allotments are to supplement, not replace, the food chain, and 50m^2 is enough for one person to manage.

The biggest hurdle that we have found is that people have to build up their time management skills as well as their horticultural skills, because the weeds do not stop growing—the disciplinary side gives Ian Woolard and me a sore head. We should not be too prescriptive. I tend to consider sites as bespoke to the community, so we should bring in communities.

We have touched on waiting lists, which is an important issue. We are about to embark on a cleansing of our waiting list. I am a great believer in that. I think that Ian Woolard will agree that interest in allotments peaked at the start of the Covid pandemic, when everybody thought that they would have a growing space. I now call our waiting list "expressions of interest", because when we go back to some of our sites, we find that people have moved on and have found something else to do. It is a wise move to analyse the demand, and we will be in a position to do that by the end of this year.

We find that the three sizes work well. As people get older, as families move on or as circumstances change, people can downgrade. We have to take all that into account.

The Convener: That is a good point. Last week, Lou Evans talked about having starter plots for people, so that they are not overwhelmed. I think that 250m^2 is equivalent to a singles tennis court or something, and that can be quite a lot if you do not have horticultural skills.

Peter Duncan: When I think about the whole issue, I think about stepping stones. The 2015 act covers allotments, but, as well as the allotment sites, everything else is important—from floral enhancements on the corner of a street to

community gardens—because those things allow people to gain confidence in working outdoors. People might decide to get off the bus at the community garden stage; they might find that they are committing enough time to, and getting enough surplus produce from, that.

We have a lot in the mix as well as allotments; orchards and other things are chucked into the equation. People are now looking at the next stage up from allotments—crofting, in a sense, or smallholdings, with community growing done in a different way. Different permutations are brought to the table, and that has a financial impact on local authorities, which have to think about how to deliver that.

The Convener: Absolutely. It is exciting times for all manners of local growing. We also have the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, which needs to fit together with all the local food strategies.

Wayne Priestley wants to come in.

Wayne Priestley: Peter Duncan has covered a lot of what I was going to say. He is right that the crucial point relates to educating people when they take on an allotment. I agree with him that we should not cut up land into small pieces just for the sake of it, but we find that a good percentage of some of the larger plots is uncultivated, because people do not have the time or the horticultural skills to use the total area of the plot. That is one of the reasons why sizes are being reduced.

A lot of people are saying that they want to try it out and see how it works, but time is the essence. People have to put in the time to make an allotment work and, given that there are huge waiting lists, we do not want people playing around with allotments if they are not going to take it seriously.

I back up what Peter Duncan said.

Paul O'Brien: I reiterate the points that have been made about the challenges relating to availability of land, lack of green space and increasing demand, and security is another issue.

However, I want to make a point about uncultivated land. Local authorities do not allow that situation to continue for too long. Our evidence shows that, in almost 80 per cent of cases, action is taken within three months, at the latest, if plots remain uncultivated. That is not draconian in any way. The reality is that there is a staged process. First, people with the plots are encouraged to cultivate the land. If they do not do that, once the trigger point is hit after three months, things start to ratchet up, and they are encouraged to use the land or hand it back.

The Convener: That is very helpful.

Ian Woolard: I have tried to do something unique in Edinburgh. People wait a long time for an allotment, so I make a point of meeting every new plot holder when they finally get one. Why do I do that? First of all, I show them the plot. If they have not had an allotment before and it is new to them, they can be quite surprised at either how big the plot is or how small it is. I meet them and go through the rules and regulations with them. I say to them, "Is this plot size okay for you?" I feel that it is important to do that, because they know in their minds whether they will manage the plot. Of course, if they cannot manage the plot, I soon find out when I do my site visits at this time of the year, because plots start to get a bit grassed over and so on. That is when emails and letters start to be sent. There are sometimes conflicts—that is always an interesting part of the job.

I always try different strategies to make things work. That is just one thing that I do. Probably about 100 plots change hands every year, and most of the new plot holders are quite successful, because they have seen what they are getting. That is my experience.

The Convener: That is great. It is important to provide that hand holding and an initial introduction in order to understand where people are at. From what has been said, I guess that we might need to think more about starter plots. People clearly have the desire to put seeds in the ground and grow food and to have that connection. We might need to look at the issue in another way. That has come through from the community garden movement, too.

I will touch on two other issues before I bring in colleagues to ask their questions. Peter Duncan said that he has found that barriers have started to be removed, with colleagues in local authorities recognising the importance of allotments. Which departments are allies in relation to allotments coming to fruition?

10:00

Peter Duncan: Surprisingly enough, the estates department is quite keen to work with us. We are repurposing our existing assets. For example, if it costs us £X to cut our green desert, we look at whether we can turn that land into community growing space. We have capital expenditure on the asset, but, as was mentioned earlier, the current rent structure covers on-going costs—I say that tongue in cheek, because prices are always going up—and we still have to pay commercial rates for water. We also have a legal obligation to control potato blight. If we have potato blight at a site, we need to provide a skip to take away green waste and so on.

In the main, if we repurpose sites, we take the maintenance cost as a saving. One site that springs to mind is in Glenrothes. It cost £1,400 a year to cut the grass there, but the land had no purpose except use for motorcycles and such things. It cost us £70,000 to create the new site, and we have an income of £3,500 per annum coming in from it. We still have the crown jewels, but the knock-on effect on the community is tenfold. If we have 50 plot holders on a site, those people plus roughly 25 to 30 per cent are affected by the site in a good way. People might be getting fresh produce from that site—half a cabbage or whatever it might be—from their next-door neighbour. Those are the benefits of the whole project. It also leads to social inclusion and so on.

When we do our survey, we will ask people on long waiting lists whether they would like to engage with a local community growing group, for example, in the meantime. Across Scotland, allotment waiting lists are the only horticultural lists that exist, so they are a bucket for everybody's interests. Instead of people sitting on a waiting list for five or six years, if we could filter those people and keep their interests moving, they might eventually decide that that is enough for them. They will either move on or hang on in there.

We are providing support to community groups. In Fife, more than 60 communities were involved in floral enhancements and so on. However, that activity stopped because of Covid, and it was not recognised how important that was, so we are looking at kicking that back into action again.

As I said earlier, it is not just about the statutory bit; it is about the bolt-on bits round about that, which is where Lou Evans and Karen Davidson from GrowGreen Scotland come in.

The Convener: Absolutely. That is very interesting. Does Ian Woolard have any thoughts on that? Peter Duncan has identified the estates department as useful, in that it has come online and recognised the importance of allotments. Are there any other departments that are helpful in Edinburgh?

Ian Woolard: Yes. The planning department has been quite helpful. Barratt Homes built many family homes in Newcraighall, and we managed, as a planning gain, to get a 26-plot site off it free of charge, which was nice. Those plots are benefiting the local community.

On top of that, s1homes has created a very nice extension behind Leith links at the Ropeworks. The extension will probably result in about 16 plots, once they have been split down the middle. I think that a bit more money was spent on the site than what was envisaged, but that keeps us and the plot holders happy.

We are also looking at bowling greens in Edinburgh that are not being used at the moment. That is a potential growth area for new sites. Some of that is slightly complicated because of the common-good element, but—fingers crossed—we will get over those issues and turn a number of bowling greens into allotments in the next few years.

The Convener: That is a great idea for repurposing. Bowling greens already have fences or hedges around them, so you do not need to worry about that, and they probably have other facilities.

Ian Woolard: They also have a water supply.

The Convener: Exactly.

My next question is for Paul O'Brien or Wayne Priestley from APSE. Do you know whether councils measure the benefits of allotments or other community growing provisions and track the impact in other policy areas?

Wayne Priestley: I am not aware of anybody tracking the impact in a measurable manner, but it is interesting that a lot of local authorities now include the provision of allotments in local plans, health and wellbeing strategies and, as you mentioned, biodiversity and climate change strategies. Sustainable urban drainage is also being built for some allotment plots. Allotments bring a multiplicity of benefits.

In relation to partners, I developed quite a large allotment site in Salford, in Greater Manchester, with the help of health providers. They were keen on such developments because they see them as a way of improving health and wellbeing and providing better food at the front end. Another option relates to the police and tackling antisocial behaviour, because a lot of intergenerational work goes on on allotments.

There are many partners out there that are willing to help to develop allotment plots. I am not aware of anybody measuring the impact of allotments, but we could certainly try to find that out.

The Convener: Thank you. It would be good to start measuring and properly understanding how important allotments and community growing spaces are.

Let us move on to another theme, which is on the impact of the 2015 act on allotment demand and provision. We might have covered some of that. I will bring in Miles Briggs.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Good morning and thank you for joining us today. I want to ask a few questions about part 9 of the 2015 act and how it has made a difference. To what extent have the numbers of plots and sites changed over the

past seven years? You have touched on some of the splitting that has taken place, and we have heard from witnesses about the assessment of waiting lists and their division into thirds. How have things changed on the ground because of part 9?

Peter Duncan: Ian Woolard, Sandy Paterson and I have been heavily involved for a long time. We are the doers, if you know what I mean, but I can see from a Scotland perspective that the rest of the authorities are starting to wake up. Going way back, there were quite a few people engaged at the start, but then it started to wane. We were left with maybe four or five local authorities that were still actively wanting to engage leading up to the 2015 act. Especially after 2015, as we headed into the secondary stuff and the guidance that was brought together, it was a bit protracted. That came in in March 2018.

Out there on the front line—at the coalface, as we call it—I think that a lot of third sector organisations saw the act as a possible opportunity to get the big stick out and bash the local authorities, and that mindset is still there to an extent. There is not a full understanding of the impacts, financially or otherwise, such as for staffing and resources in the authorities.

In 2009, when I came into post, we were sitting with 13 sites in Fife. We now have 39 sites and there is still only one of me. A wee bit of recognition is needed. The act has helped a bit with that in the councils' internal management structures, but it has not got there yet by any means. There is still a distinct lack of staffing and resources. As Ian Woolard said, we still need that personal touch. It is people that we are dealing with here; it is not tins of beans.

We also have to take into account that our client base has changed a lot in the past 10 years. We have a lot more women and children on site, so there has been a need to have a change in facilities. A majority of our sites, although not all of them, have toilets and so forth, and maybe a meeting room.

There have been benefits as a result of the act but, to put it in a tongue-in-cheek way, the problem is the uneducated not knowing what is going on in the local authorities. People can read what the act and the secondary guidance say, but they do not understand the day-to-day problems that Ian Woolard and I have at the coalface, whether that is aggression or whatever. There is a weird and wonderful bunch of allotment holders out there. We have been challenged on the cultivation side. We have been in court with people with no-dig policies and people who want to grow dandelions and stuff like that. Everybody has their own opinion about what they want to do. We cannot be too prescriptive about it but, equally, from a local authority perspective, we still have to have rules and regulations that tie in with what legal says, what planning says and whatever else.

There have been good bits and bad bits. There has been some misunderstanding of the act, especially about waiting lists. I get that quite regularly. Why have we not done anything about the waiting lists with the thresholds? A honeymoon period was built in for the local authorities but, to be honest, that might need to be looked at seriously, given people's desire now, as human beings, to go outside into green space and to grow. Are we going to manage to meet that? Probably not, for financial reasons or otherwise. With the review going on, this might be an opportune moment to look at that.

Ian Woolard: It is hard to top what Peter Duncan said, but I have certainly seen quite a few changes in my 30 years of managing allotments for the city council. When I started in 1992, we had 17 or 18 sites. By 2020, we were up to 32. Like Peter's council, we have embarked on creating quite a few new allotment sites. We have built many in Edinburgh since 2011, although something to bear in mind is that they are not big sites such as the existing one at Inverleith. The new sites are fairly small. If we were to create a new site of the size of the one at Inverleith, it would cost hundreds of thousands, and the council would have that debt for many years to come.

It has been an interesting job. I am always looking for new sites and considering how we can better manage our existing stock but, as Peter Duncan says, the job is full of challenges.

Miles Briggs: You touched on how the act has been interpreted by local authorities. On the subject of allotments, you two are obviously the living embodiment of the councils that you work in. We know that Highland Council does not run or allocate sites despite having large waiting lists for private sites in the Inverness area. Peter, you mentioned the honeymoon period. Has that prevented people in local authorities from needing to act and thinking about the waiting lists that have built up? Have they seen it as something that is coming rather than as something that they have to act on now?

Peter Duncan: I have spoken to various local authorities for advice. I think that what has happened is that there have been a lot of staffing changes in local authorities. There has been a lot of change over the years since 2015. Sandy Paterson, Ian Woolard and I are probably the diehards. I get phone calls and emails from people at other councils who are seeking advice on tenancy agreements, how to work with leases or whatever. Some of those inquiries come through our estates department, which directs them to us. Moray Council is an example.

10:15

I would not say that people have used the honeymoon period as an excuse, but we have a lot of officers being put into positions without experience behind them, and there is a lack of support. To be frank about it, that comes right back to this building. If someone phones up today, they will be told, "Phone Ian or Peter—they will help you." There needs to be a go-to for those people. Some of them are right in at the deep end and they have third-sector groups biting at their backs saying, "You must provide this and do that", and quoting every possible piece of the act. The poor individual does not have the backbone of experience, and that is possibly why they are coming to Ian or me for advice. I do not mind that. I do not want anybody to falter, but that person tends to be the lone individual in their authority. It is about them getting the officers in their authority to start thinking along the same lines as Ian's or mine. We have spoken about education in horticulture, but never mind that. There is also a need for education in the authority structure.

Did the act make a big difference to me when it arrived on the doorstep? Not really, because we had been involved in it so much and we knew what was coming, but it is quite daunting for someone who picks it up green, on day 1. Some organisations and plot holders are keen to just keep pushing and pushing without taking time. It takes me about three years from inception to delivery on the ground. There is no sense in delivering an allotment in the middle of July, for example; nobody wants it. It is better to time it so that people can get ready for the start of the growing season.

It would be good if the Government could facilitate some support for the local authority officers, whether that is administered through the tripartite working group that we have discussed, which Ian Woolard, Sandy Paterson and I sit on, or through APSE or something like that. A one-stop shop for that support would be good. I hope that that answers your question.

Miles Briggs: It does—thank you. You covered quite a lot of points there.

You mentioned individuals who do not want a full-size allotment but want to start growing, and community growing especially. Has the demand for that been assessed, especially as we come out of the pandemic, when people have wanted such spaces? Is a different model needed? On our visits, we saw raised beds being provided, and people getting small spaces to see whether they are able to sustain them. Could that approach be developed on new sites to allow communities of people who are in the same position to start out and develop?

Peter Duncan: If anything good came out of Covid, it is that we managed to change our information technology systems so that we can contact everybody on our waiting lists. That has been a big hurdle for local authorities in the past. We are now able to contact the 1,800 people who are sitting on the list. As a first-stage survey, we intend to ask them what they want, and we will be able to zone that down into postcodes and communities. For example, if there was a desire in Auchtermuchty for a community garden and an orchard, that is the road that we would go down. Basically, we are providing the community with what it desires, rather than just assuming that there is demand.

At present, we know about the demand only because of the existing sites and their waiting lists. There could be people on the lists from wherever, and people sometimes put their names on multiple lists, which gives us false figures. Going forward, our method of delivery will be community led and officer supported, and our initial survey will allow that. The people who identify that an allotment is the number 1 choice for them will then be surveyed further, along with existing plot holders, and that will shape our new allotment strategy that will come in 2023-24.

Ian Woolard: In Edinburgh, we know where our demand is. There is massive demand in EH5, EH6, EH4, EH9 and EH10. I had a look the other day and there were about 5,600 people on the waiting list. In 2019, we had 3,000 people on the list, but we cleansed it by asking people whether they still wanted an allotment, and that took it down to 1,290. I do not think that anybody saw the pandemic coming, but the list has now gone back up and it is sitting at about 5,600.

My concern is that, in Edinburgh, land is at a premium. There is not much land for new plots in EH6, which covers Leith, or in EH9 and EH10, which cover Morningside. It is a challenge. There is no question about that. How do we get the land to put new sites on? That has always been my concern.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Good morning, panel. It is great to see you.

My first question, which was about a more joined-up approach to the provision of growing spaces, has already been covered, so I will go back to Ian Woolard's point. How often do you review your waiting list in Edinburgh?

Ian Woolard: The last time that we reviewed it was in March 2019, so we are probably coming up for a review again. The quickest way to do that would be to contact the people on the waiting list by email. As Peter Duncan said, people applied for an allotment during the pandemic thinking that that

was a nice thing to do. The waiting list is a bit of a worry, as the numbers keep rising.

We have an online process that makes things much easier for people. Before that, people had to do things in the old-fashioned way. They had to phone me, and I would send them an application form. That held the list to about 350 a year. The figures from last year show that about 1,300 people applied. Whenever we make things slightly easier for people, they will always take the easy route.

Marie McNair: What about Peter Duncan? Do you review the waiting list annually?

Peter Duncan: No, unfortunately not. Ours is reviewed on a quarterly basis. We are challenged to report quarterly performance figures for plot allocations and waiting lists. Every quarter, I have to justify what we are doing and, if the numbers have gone up, I have to say why they have gone up and what we are doing about it. That works in my favour immensely, because it gives elected members and senior management a good picture of what is going on.

I mentioned the new system. We have found that we can go into it and pick out duplications. As Ian Woolard said, it is quite easy to tick a box and fill something in. It will be an interesting exercise when we go through what we are going to go through shortly. The last time that we did that was about two years after I came into post, in order to establish the real demand before I started to build sites. We lost more than 50 per cent of the people on paper lists, but we did not bin them. We put them to the side to see whether they would come back, and some of them came back at a later date.

It is quite interesting to see the figures every quarter. When we drill down into them, we see that they reflect employment issues. There might be a major employer in the area. For example, when Tullis Russell shut the door in Glenrothes, that had a major impact on our waiting list, because people were of an age at which they had worked at Tullis Russell all their days. They were 50-odd years old, so they were not going back into mainstream employment. They had time on their hands, and they wanted an allotment. There was a wee bit of fallout from that. We can keep our eye on that side of things. People tend to miss that.

Ian Woolard: I am very impressed that Peter Duncan does quarterly reviews. Well done, Peter. From a selfish point of view, my worry is that, if I suddenly contacted 5,500 people to ask whether they still wanted an allotment, my email inbox would explode for the next month, and all that I would do would be to sit at my desk answering emails, because it would be guaranteed that people would want to know where they were on the list. However, we need to do a validation quite soon. I am still trying to figure out how we are going to do that.

Paul O'Brien: On waiting lists, we have surveyed more than 150 local authorities across the UK, and we have been told that about 90 per cent of them update their waiting lists regularly—I take that as being on an annual basis at least—in order to remove people who are no longer interested or have moved away from the area. There are other interesting statistics from that survey. Seventy-one per cent of those who responded said that they restrict the availability of plots to people who live in the local authority area, and only 21 per cent allow plots to be passed on to a family member these days.

Those are just a couple of statistics relating to the management of waiting lists.

Marie McNair: Are you aware of other parts of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 being used to enable community growing for allotment purposes? What about asset transfers and participation requests, for example? Can you give any examples of those from your authorities?

I will go back to Peter Duncan and Ian Woolard to answer that, if that is okay.

Peter Duncan: We have had one or two requests about community asset transfers. Obviously, that has a knock-on effect on local authorities. Given that the act applies only to land that is owned or leased by the local authority, if I were to do a community asset transfer, that would mean that that asset would effectively be out of the equation for reporting purposes and otherwise. If we put out a site with 100 plots, for example, all of a sudden I will have lost 100 plots.

In Fife, there are quite a few private sites, especially in the Dalgety Bay and Rosyth areas. We had plenty of contact with them during the Covid pandemic but, prior to that, they tended to be just what they said on the tin—private sites that operated their own waiting lists and whatever else. At the time, a big discussion went on about the inclusion of private sites in the act, but they were not included. I thought that they should have been because, if we as a local authority report back to the Government on the demand in the area and there are a lot of private sites in it, that will not be a true reflection of the demand—far from it. That is where we are on that.

I cannot say that groups are overly keen to take on community asset transfers because there are pitfalls there. We joke about allotment wars, but there are real allotment wars. Even where sites are out on leases, the leases are written in such a way that mirrors our direct managed lease, except the name is changed. That is mirrored in the main lease for the site, so the council really has the default position, because we own the land.

10:30

We have had to do that when groups have felt that they could not manage because the issue was too personal. That has usually been because the secretary or the chairman was also a plot holder, dealing with things was too personal, and the situation got to the stage at which the plot holders were basically not dealing with their plots. Because of how the act is written, if their lease goes into default, that will put the main lease into default. However, the group is not then challenged by the council. Like me, the council stands by the group, and we bring in our resource—that is, the legal services—to deal with the issue. Where would the group get that back-up?

Those are the disadvantages of doing community asset transfers. I am probably on more dart boards in Fife than people can imagine. What you will end up with is unmanaged and unruly sites. That sounds bad, but that is the hard fact of the matter when there are strong individuals who do not want to play ball. Unfortunately, there still have to be rules and regulations. The groups do not have the teeth or the resources to deal with that. Secretaries have resigned because of the grief that they have had. They have just wanted to go along and work on their allotment plot without the grief that has gone with that.

We have quite a mixture in Fife. We have directly managed sites, privately owned sites, sites that are managed through groups, and leased sites.

I hope that that answers your question.

Ian Woolard: I do not have a lot of experience of community asset transfers. Some of my housing colleagues do quite a lot of that work, particularly with the land in Edinburgh that is on the housing revenue account. Most of the allotment sites in Edinburgh are directly managed.

Marie McNair: Does Paul O'Brien want to add anything to that?

Paul O'Brien: Yes. I support what Peter Duncan said. All the evidence that we see shows that there is an on-going need. Even where committees that manage sites are in place, there is a need for on-going subsidy support and skills help—that sort of umbilical cord back to the local authority. All the survey work that we have done over the years shows that that continues to be important. In many ways, the need is increasing. Some of the groups struggle to survive on their own.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): My constituency is East Lothian, which probably has the longest waiting time in all of Scotland, so the matter is an interest of mine. The previous panel talked about a community garden in Dumbarton. There are also allotments that are available not through the council but through a private arrangement, with which there has been a problem.

We have talked about waiting lists and trigger points; you have both mentioned waiting times. Could the information be tracked nationally? The question is first for Ian Woolard, then APSE, because the second part of my question is about benchmarking among councils, although that would not be to compare apples with apples. Ian, will you comment on information being tracked nationally? Where is Edinburgh, compared with other local authorities. Would such tracking be a useful exercise?

Ian Woolard: That would be a very useful exercise. I would love to know where Edinburgh stands in comparison with the rest of the country, on waiting lists. I imagine that some London boroughs also have huge waiting lists. Any built-up area, or city, will have big waiting lists. It would be a useful for me to have such a benchmark—it would be great—and it would be useful to see where demand is. I am sure that there are local authorities that have short waiting lists. When Peter Duncan and I had meetings with local authorities about the matter about four years ago, we found that Clackmannanshire Council had only about 16 people on its waiting list. The situation is probably quite varied around the country; it would be interesting to see that.

Paul McLennan: Does Peter Duncan want to come in? I will also bring in APSE on benchmarking and comparisons between councils.

Peter Duncan: That work has been on the go for a long time in the tripartite working group that Tracey McCollin from the Scottish Government heads up. Local authorities have different requirements and we have to take geography into account. We have small local authorities that cover small areas, and we also have Fife, for example, which has fishing in the east, mining in the west and a new town in the middle.

We looked at the possibility of problem solving by matching local authorities, such as the Highland Council, Scottish Borders Council and Dumfries and Galloway Council that have similar problems with remote settlements that might require different things. The legislation talks about provision within a radius of five miles—half an hour or so on public transport—but imagine applying that in the Highlands, Dumfries and Galloway or the Borders. Ian will correct me if I am wrong, but we were thinking that a buddy system could answer many of the questions. There is no sense in one authority following another down a hole that it has fallen down. Let us not invent reinvent the wheel. Councils have allotments for similar purposes—to grow food, for social

inclusion and so on. Paperwork is fine, but practical know-how, an attitude that says "Don't worry—it'll be okay", and a steadying hand on people's shoulders are needed.

In the private sector there have been a lot of opportunists—there still are, but I will mention no names—providing growing space beside garden centres and such like and charging extortionate rates. We have to bear in mind—this is the most important thing—the need for allotments to be affordable for all.

Everyone in Fife, for example, should be on a level playing field in terms of accessibility, but there is an imbalance in Fife. St Andrews is a good example. We have severe deprivation in one part of St Andrews and there are some very affluent areas and they do not mix, but as an officer I treat everybody the same.

We are on the same page, but we must be careful, if we introduce change, that we help local authorities to administer it. We can support groups. There has been a lot of discussion in the tripartite group about how that could happen, and whether groups that want to start growing sites could get financial start-up or seedcorn grants.

Paul McLennan: I was going to come on to that in my next question. I saw Paul O'Brien nodding his head a couple of times when we were talking about benchmarking, the advantages of which we have heard about. Do you want to talk about that?

Paul O'Brien: We collect data across 17 local authority front-line services. At present, we tend to collect allotment information with parks and grounds maintenance data. Perhaps that is something that we need to revisit. We look at quality, productivity, customer satisfaction and so on. We need to look at the matter in the round, which relates to points that Peter Duncan has made. We collect data based on family groups, so that we are comparing like with like.

However, the reason for benchmarking is not just to have a league table; it is to have data that we can compare so that we can see what is behind it and see why some people are doing better or worse than others, and so that we can share information. That is something that we are happy to revisit and expand on.

Interest in the area is obviously growing. The 2015 act has had a significant impact for reasons that we have already heard about. There is a long-term trend of increasing interest, and there is people's awakening on biodiversity, climate change, healthy lifestyles and social cohesion, so there is a growing need for information and data. That is something that we will look at.

Paul McLennan: Thank you. That was very helpful.

My next questions are on waiting lists. You have mentioned people being on waiting lists for more than five years—section 112(2)(b) of the 2015 act is on that—and how we might tackle the problem. Do you want to add anything?

My second question is about communication, which Peter Duncan touched on, and exploring with people who are on waiting lists new sites and what can be done to help them to look for new sites. I ask Ian Woolard, first, about waiting lists, being on a list for more than five years and communications. Both witnesses have touched on that already.

Ian Woolard: Waiting lists have always been my main concern. Plots have been given recently in Inverleith and Ferry Road. Most of the people who applied joined waiting lists in 2008 and 2009 and were still very keen even after all these years. Every so often I will trickle feed into the top 20 to make sure that they are still interested. I do that to ensure that I know that when a plot comes up I can fill it straight away. We do not want plots lying about too long at this time of year because they become overgrown quickly.

I do not know how to solve the waiting list problem. Some waiting lists in Edinburgh for new sites will meet the five-year deadline easily, but people who are waiting for plots at Midmar, Inverleith, Ferry Road and Warriston are still extremely keen after many years . My concern is about how to make plots available. I am always flipping plots when they come up. You can imagine that people who have waited a long time for a plot will invest in it a lot and will be there for a long time. I look at it as though it is a dam: what is behind the dam keeps building, but there is only so much I can release. I have always been concerned about the five-years provision, to be honest.

Paul McLennan: Does Peter Duncan have anything to add?

Peter Duncan: No. We have peaked recently because of what we have been through, as a country, in the past two years. However, from a Fife perspective, there is imbalance among sites. We can have immediate availability on one site, while others sites might have 80 or 100 folk waiting on a list. I mentioned the survey; I think that it will help to filter people's wishes and help us to see what they want. There will always be waiting lists for allotments.

In the future, communities will have to come forward to tell us what they want, and we will be the facilitators in relation to land and, potentially, to funding. There is external funding that people can access, but they find that starting from zero is difficult. I touched on that earlier. Is there potential

for having a wee slush fund that councils could administer?

10:45

Paul McLennan: You must be reading my mind. My next question is about community growing projects and allotment associations having access to funding. Are you aware of who the big funders are and the role of the Scottish Government in funding? In relation to part 9 of the 2015 act, do you have any thoughts on support from the Scottish Government? What support is there from funders and is there anything else that the Scottish Government could do in terms of broader support?

Peter Duncan: That has been my question from day 1. The legislation is okay, but who has the money to pay for it? There are cocktails of funding, but the difficult thing for a group is to get initial funding. They can start seeking more funding thereafter. You will excuse the pun, but a seedcorn grant would not be a bad thing. The Scottish Government could bring to the table funding that local authorities could have control over. The 2015 act applies to land that is owned by local authorities, so it is not as though money would be going to privately owned land. That would allow different approaches to be taken and would allow groups to take things forward at their speed.

The days of local authorities imposing things such as play parks and allotment sites on communities have gone. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 quite clearly states where we need to be, but it has taken seven years for mindsets to start to change—not just in relation to part 9 but in relation to other aspects. They are all linked, which we spoke about earlier. There are links across the board in relation to community asset transfer or whatever. Our biggest hurdles are the waiting list thresholds and funding.

Paul McLennan: Ian Woolard, do you have anything to add?

Ian Woolard: Peter Duncan has put it very well. Funding is the big issue and, of course, land in Edinburgh is also a big issue. We are looking at pockets of land that we could develop, but we need funding. Because of the way things are going with council budgets, there is a fight for what we need; a new allotment site might cost £100,000, but a new school will take precedence over a new allotment site.

Paul McLennan: That is all from me, unless anybody else wants to come in.

The Convener: Paul O'Brien wants to come in. I am mindful of time, so we will move on after that.

Paul O'Brien: I will keep it brief. There has been a similar experience in England. The Government brought forward pocket parks and provided one-off funding for development of pockets of land for parks. The big issue with that is on-going revenue costs. One-off capital cost funding to develop a bit of land is okay, but there are on-going maintenance costs that need to be funded. It is important that initiatives with one-off funding are thought through so that there will be an on-going maintenance funding element.

The Convener: Thank you for that. We will move on to local food growing strategies and put questions mainly to Ian Woolard and Peter Duncan. I am curious to know to what extent you have been involved in development of local food strategies in Edinburgh and Fife.

Ian Woolard: Colleagues in other groups are more involved in the food growing strategy than I am. Fiona MacLeod is doing that; I do not have a lot of experience in that.

The Convener: So, allotments have not been brought into the mix?

Ian Woolard: Not at the moment. Edinburgh's allotment strategy runs from 2017 to 2027, and our food growing strategy is being prepared by another colleague. I believe that it is almost complete.

The Convener: That is great. Peter, have you been involved in your local food strategy to any extent?

Peter Duncan: Yes. We have an allotment strategy, but we are also involved in the food growing strategy, which is headed up by Ross Spalding—who works in environment, climate change and that sort of thing—and his team. Allotments play a part in the food growing strategy. There are six pillars and we are one of them—there is also food poverty and other things. Equally, the people round the table—the likes of Kettle Produce—are major providers in Fife, and they are looking at their surplus food.

However, there seems to be quite a bit of confusion about the allotments strategy and the food growing strategy because of the way that the act is written. To my mind, allotments are as per part 9 of the 2015 act, whereas the food growing strategy encompasses everything else within a local authority's area, whether it be surplus produce from the supermarkets or whatever. There is some confusion. I have spoken to colleagues in other local authorities, and there is a wee bit of, "We've done our food strategy," but I am saying, "What about your allotment strategy?" There is a wee bit of misunderstanding that maybe needs to be clarified at a higher level.

Our food growing strategy is due to be completed by August. It will influence the new allotment strategy because of the diverse approach—it has brought more people to the table than the allotment strategy ever did. It has brought NHS Fife to the table, as well as estates and private landowners who are looking at diversifying parts of their farms for different usages. There are lots of different permutations.

The allotments strategy is very focused but, to me, the food growing strategy is a wee bit like a spider—there are that many legs on it—and it will be very difficult to make sure it is co-ordinated and, more importantly, aligned with the allotment strategy. I keep saying, "It's all very nice to have your food growing strategy, but we have a statutory obligation under part 9 to do this."

Under the food growing strategy, we are currently mapping all the allotment sites, orchards and so on in the whole of Fife. The first phase started in the west of Fife, and we are working with Greener Kirkcaldy on what it is doing. We are gathering that information and bringing it to the table, but again the question is about who will co-ordinate it and who will make sure that the dots are joined up for delivery. Sometimes, I feel that these documents could get quite lost—they basically go on the shelf and are not seen for another five years or so.

The Convener: Thank you for that. Paul, I did not direct the question to you, but I have just realised that, with your overview hat on, you may have an understanding of how the food strategies are being developed across Scotland.

Paul O'Brien: At the strategic level, local authorities are working on so many different strategies at the moment and trying to integrate them that I think it is still at the stage where people are trying to put things together with climate change strategies, action plans and so on. It is an on-going process—it is not yet as ingrained as we would like it to be.

The Convener: In my role on this committee, I am beginning to realise that local authorities have many different strategies to look at. There are strategies and plans for many different things, but there is also a need for the integration that you are talking about, whereby the local food growing strategy can speak to the local authority's climate strategy and the biodiversity strategy. It is about that holistic thinking.

I am going to bring in Marie McNair with our closing themes around community organisations, volunteering and planning.

Marie McNair: The importance of volunteering to successful community growing has been clear from the written submissions and our committee visits. How can local authorities continue to help community growing and allotments to thrive in areas with lower levels of volunteering?

Peter Duncan: Ian, you can go first on that one.

Ian Woolard: That is a good question. I suppose that giving them the land would be the important thing to start off with. Community asset transfer would be a starting point, but I do not have a lot of experience of that.

Peter Duncan: Groups can become very disheartened with the red tape and being just left and expected to get on with it. As was just mentioned, groups very much need an umbilical cord from the local authority to continue the support. Equally, that support needs to come from the Scottish Government down the way.

If I am taking forward a growing project, I will meet the group, listen to what they have to say and ask them about their ambitions. I will then analyse that, bring it all together and ask them to take a step behind me as an officer. Then, when the flak happens because the planning application has gone in and there is all the nimbyism attached to that—because there is; there is no sense in saying there is not—I will guide them through the process. Once we get the red tape out of the way and it comes back to them, I let them step forward and I will walk beside them for a wee while. Eventually, I should be able to take a step back. That, to me, is empowering them.

I have seen too many groups go in, get an absolute stoning to start with and say, "We're not going on with this any longer. We've have had enough." Sometimes, I have seen the main objectors become part of the project once the project is on the ground, because they no longer lack understanding of what the project will deliver. A community garden in Tayport, in Fife, is a good example of that. I was hounded out of Tayport for months because of it, but the important bit for me was that the members of the group did not get headed off at the pass by the negativism about the site, because the objectors could not see past their own noses.

There are a lot of ambitions out there. We—me and Sandy Paterson, who is sitting behind me here—have the hard job of harnessing those ambitions and the expectations that are placed upon us. I mean that not in a bad way; it is about guiding the groups. There could also be some third sector organisations out there that have expectations that are beyond belief. The important thing for me is to make sure that the groups are representative of the wider community, so that we are not upsetting the whole thing.

The Convener: That is a good point. What you are conveying is the importance of that support.

I believe that Paul O'Brien wants to come in. I am mindful of the time, and I think Marie McNair has a couple more questions, so please keep your responses succinct.

Paul O'Brien: We need facilitation, nurture and subsidy support on an on-going but diminishing basis. That is brief.

The Convener: Brilliant. Thank you very much.

Marie McNair: Yes, that is what I picked up on the visits in Glasgow yesterday. The groups just want a wee hand up from the council and to know that their requests are not falling on deaf ears. If they can get a wee hand up, that is important to them. They just want to get on and grow.

How can communities use local place plans to ensure that local authorities include community growing in local development plans?

11:00

Peter Duncan: We have on-going discussions with planning colleagues all the time—that is written into the guidance for the planning officers in Fife. Admittedly, there is a good deal of correspondence going on there. Equally, we have community learning and development workers out there who are working with the communities in a place-based approach. As you probably know, Fife is split into seven areas. We have a lead CLD officer in each of the seven areas, and they will be getting some training on green space very shortly so that they are not giving the public false hope about delivery. It is not all, "Let's get a spade in the ground," because there might be contamination or whatever. It is just a wee bit of knowledge for them. That helps me to co-ordinate the work, because there are seven of them and only one of me.

Marie McNair: Thanks for that.

My last question is: could the planning system be better used to ensure that adequate provision is made for new and existing community growers? Sandy Paterson is nodding in the public gallery. Does he want to join the table to answer that one?

The Convener: We have another panel, and I will organise that. Can we just keep the focus on where we are?

Peter Duncan: I agree that there needs to be some relaxation of the planning guidance so that, under permitted development, we can develop community gardens and allotment sites. Restrictions would be placed on a site if it was in a designed landscape, for example, or in a conservation area or something like that, and there might be some guidance on structures if it involved polytunnels, for example, but the process could probably be much easier than it is.

My personal experience is that it depends, first, on the mood of the planning officer on the day and, secondly, on who you get, because there is no continuity across the planning staff—one person wants a container painted green and another wants it clad with timber. Last week, I had a meeting with the head of planning at which I said that we need some guidance for the planning staff. I suggested that there should perhaps be a dedicated officer. However, he told me there are never the resources for that, so I asked whether we could we write some guidance for all the planning officers to go by.

I will touch on one other thing before I finish. Scottish Water has come back on the two most recent applications and has refused to connect a water supply to a growing site. We have had all this hassle before about double-check valves and non-return valves. To me, it is a fundamental problem if a major supplier like Scottish Water says that we cannot have the water. We need the water. That will be a restriction as well, and it is something that we need to note.

The Convener: Thank you very much. Nobody else wants to come in on planning. Paul, do you have any comments about planning?

Paul O'Brien: I have just one thought to add. I know that other administrations are experimenting with the concept of biodiversity net gain. Perhaps we could look at that in terms of the Scottish planning frameworks.

The Convener: Thanks for that insight. I have made a note that we need to look at Scottish Water, because that issue came up quite early on. You have to pay commercial charges to Scottish Water. Maybe there needs to be a conversation to ease the way for more allotments and community growing spaces. It seems strange to me that you have to pay a commercial charge.

I thank all the witnesses on the first panel. It was a very insightful and helpful conversation. It was good to hear more of your anecdotes, which painted the bigger picture of what you are dealing with. For example, Peter Duncan talked about understanding that a company in Fife going out of business might lead to more people applying for allotments. It was a very useful conversation.

There will now be a short break before we welcome our second panel of witnesses.

11:04

Meeting suspended.

11:13

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome our second panel of witnesses, some of whom are joining us remotely

and some of whom are here in person. We have Sandy Paterson, assistant manager for food growing with Glasgow City Council; Amy Alcorn, green space programme co-ordinator with Scottish Borders Council; Marina Curran-Colthart, local biodiversity officer with Argyll and Bute Council; and Sinclair Laing, policy and strategy manager with Aberdeen City Council.

It would be helpful if members could direct their questions to a specific witness where possible, although I will be happy to bring in others who wish to contribute. I would be grateful if our witnesses who are online would type an R in the chat function in BlueJeans to indicate when they want to come in.

I will start the session with the first question. In last week's session, in our visits and in the earlier session today, we have learned that there are huge benefits from people growing food in community growing spaces and allotments. I direct this question first to Marina Curran-Colthart. What are the main barriers that prevent local authorities from creating more allotments and community growing spaces?

Marina Curran-Colthart (Argyll and Bute Council): Good morning. To talk about the barriers, I first have to give a bit of a potted history of Argyll and Bute. We have only three allotment sites, and they are run by allotment associations. The land is council owned, and the allotment associations pay a peppercorn rent annually.

One of the barriers is certainly about people's expectations. We carry out land searches and work with estates to look at growing opportunities in towns and villages to meet the needs of the applicants on the waiting list in those areas. We acknowledge that there is an educational role in relation to the reasonable steps that the council must take under part 9 of the 2015 act.

11:15

In terms of community benefit and community empowerment, individuals sometimes have a misunderstanding of what we can deliver and of what we can provide. We have particular groups that have been knocking on the door for a number of years asking for land and we have provided a number of sites, but their expectations were that those sites were fully facilitated, with things such as boundary fencing, water and other facilities. Expectations need to be managed. That is one of the barriers that we have tried to overcome with information and signposting in meeting those needs.

The Convener: Sinclair, what is your experience in Aberdeen?

Sinclair Laing (Aberdeen City Council): Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence. It has been an interesting conversation and a lot of the issues have come out this morning.

As we know, the benefits are multiple—they are outlined in the guidance that was issued in 2018. In 2012, I participated in a social return on investment research study in Aberdeen that looked at the benefits of allotments. To pick up on something from the earlier conversation, that showed that, for every £1 that was invested in community growing sites, there was an £8 return.

There is clearly a massive benefit, but undoubtedly there are barriers. We have already had the discussion about finance, both in terms of revenue and capital. Aberdeen City Council spends more on allotments than we make on them, so there is a deficit in our revenue budget. How we manage that and what we do about the pricing of allotments is a decision for politicians, but there is an impact. When we look across all the other things that our grounds services and other services need to do in relation to biodiversity, climate change, land management, engaging communities and so on, we see that it is a multiple and complex problem. The word "maintenance" is raised constantly whenever we talk about what we will do with our land and how we will engage communities on the use of our land.

Then there is the question of capital. There is not a lot of money swilling around for public authorities, and it is diminishing. We can access money from outside, but a lot of that has, rightly, been directed towards investment in relation to climate change and biodiversity and not necessarily food growing opportunities. We face capital and revenue finance issues.

On the other side, we have a limited number of people who can work in the area. Again, that is a revenue budget issue but, as our waiting lists increase, there is a need to manage that process, which then takes away from delivering further allotment sites and supporting communities in delivering those sites. That resource is getting thinner as demand increases. I think that we have one dedicated officer in Aberdeen who works on allotments, and that is a relatively new thing.

There has been a lot of conversation about engaging communities, the community asset transfer process and so on. That is complicated. We need to provide that umbilical cord for communities—I think that that term was used earlier—but that requires resource from our assets teams and community learning and development teams, but they also need to provide that resource in relation to lots of other community issues and not just food growing. There is a complicated process that probably puts off communities from

delivering more sites for themselves—there are issues of fear, continuity and so on. A lot of resource goes into supporting communities to bring forward proposals, but it is not always there to hand hold them all the way through the process.

Planning has been mentioned, and more can be done in that regard. It is getting better, and I think that the new local development plans will take a stronger role in protecting and delivering more sites. Certainly in Aberdeen, we are building that into policy. We have built it into developer obligations negotiations, and we need to put more pressure on developers to deliver sites through master planning and site delivery. The new local development plans will help with that process, but there will be a lag before we see delivery on the ground.

There are issues of money, council resources, communities, developers, planners and so on. There are multiple and complex problems.

The Convener: Thank you for that thorough overview. Does Amy Alcorn or Sandy Paterson want to come in on barriers?

Sandy Paterson (Glasgow City Council): There are several barriers that we believe are preventing additional provision. First, there is a perceived capacity issue in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage. There is also a perceived distrust of local authorities among community groups and citizens, particularly in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage. We seek to work with a collaborative approach. There is often a capacity-building issue, so a plan has to be developed for that before we can move to constructing sites. Growchapel, which is a recent site, was brought to our attention by Police Scotland, which ended up being an excellent partner in it. That took us 30 months from inception to breaking the ground with a spade for growers.

The narrative around managing expectations has been touched on several times this morning. There is an enthusiastic spike at the start of the process and then, if expectations are not met, that enthusiasm quickly wanes. Resilience and gumption are two character traits that are specific to the Scottish personality, and encouraging that and making people aware of the issues and having a transparent conversation with them in the first instance can often go a long way to keeping people on the journey with you.

There are also competing priorities for the use of available open space, particularly in areas of urban density. In a post-industrial city such as Glasgow, land contamination is a big issue, too. Many of our citizens might not recognise those other factors that come into the mix.

Possibly one of the biggest barriers that we have is that, essentially, food growing is not normalised in everyday life. People are disconnected from their food, where it comes from and how it is produced. There is also a limited awareness in the educational curriculum of the benefits of food growing. The density of urban housing and the competing priorities for available space are huge barriers. People see spaces, but there are many priorities that a city needs to address, and food growing, although it is rising up the political agenda at present, is not always maintained on that level.

The statutory obligations in part 9 of the 2015 act have been excellent. The community asset transfer provisions are probably a lot more convoluted than they needed to be. For many community groups, that is a barrier to accessing land. In Glasgow, we have taken a unique step and developed the “People make Glasgow” communities programme. That is a step below community asset transfer, but it still provides the tenure that groups need to access funding from organisations such as the National Lottery. I am pleased to say that we have recently transferred an old production nursery to Locavore, which is an organisation that many members may know, on a 25-year tenure. We look forward to seeing that site come to fruition in the next three years.

The recognition of food growing as an individual theme in the place-making standard would be of benefit and would remove many of the barriers. That would put food growing on the same level as the other things in the place-making standard. We always try to take a place-making standard approach to the development and delivery of our allotment and growing spaces in Glasgow.

There is a need for a clear toolkit to measure and highlight the additional benefits of local food growing, such as the health benefits, social interaction, green prescriptions, community cohesion and all the other qualitative benefits that do not show up in a spreadsheet. We have been working towards doing that initially in our pilot at the Growchapel site. We are trying to work with focus groups and carry out a five-year research programme to prove the case for the benefits that allotments have.

The Convener: Thanks for that response. That is an interesting point about food growing needing to be in the place-making standard—that could be a great help.

Amy Alcorn wants to come in.

Amy Alcorn (Scottish Borders Council): Thank you for having me. I could not agree more with absolutely every one of Sandy Paterson’s points. He has said many of the things that I wanted to mention. I completely agree that none of

this can sit on a spreadsheet. It is about enhancing people's lives with food growing, getting it into the curriculum and getting young people involved from an early age so that they have experience of growing and take it forward for the rest of their lives.

I am probably different from most of the other witnesses today in that I have been working in the public sector for only seven months. Before that, I worked in the third sector and managed a food growing charity that worked on food growing projects across the Scottish Borders. I am very new to local authority work, but the reason why I applied for the job as the council's green space officer was because I am passionate about community food growing and feel that everybody should have access to it.

In my role, I have worked with at least 20 community groups that want to start growing food. I now see a huge demand. Because Scottish Borders Council has produced a strategy and shown it to people across the Borders, so many people are coming forward. Sometimes, it is individuals asking for advice and help, but it is also primary and secondary schools, as well as organisations that already have a wealth of experience of delivering community growing projects but that want extra help. For example, recently, I found that people wanted compost. For the council, I manage the Scottish Borders community food growers network, and we have managed to provide 50 tonnes of compost for growing spaces.

There absolutely are barriers. For me, they come down to financial barriers, but there is a huge drive across Scotland. Definitely in the Borders, people are desperate to grow and desperate for help with growing, which I find encouraging and welcome.

The Convener: Thanks very much for your contribution. Scottish Borders Council is very lucky to have somebody who has been working in the third sector in community food growing. I am sure that you have a lot to offer from that perspective.

I will bring in Miles Briggs, who has questions on another theme.

Miles Briggs: Good morning to our second panel. Thanks for joining us here and online today. What difference has part 9 of the 2015 act made to access to new allotments? Where have you seen access to community growing expand, for those who are looking for that rather than an allotment? That is for Sinclair Laing and anyone else who wants to come in afterwards.

Sinclair Laing: Part 9 of the 2015 act has really helped. If you look at the numbers on the spreadsheets, you will see that our waiting lists have gone through the roof, partly I guess because the act came in and there was a lot of promotion and engagement around this issue. That brought people out of the woodwork and made them aware of the opportunities that were available, so that pushed the numbers up. On top of that, we have had Covid and people's desire to get outdoors, and the impacts on people's budgets more recently, which have attracted people to growing their own food and so on. There has been a perfect storm of reasons to send the waiting lists through the roof.

It looks bad, but I think that there has been a lot of opportunity, because it has forced local authorities to think again about how to approach this issue. If there was not a duty on local authorities to act, we would probably just sit on the waiting list for a period of time because of all the barriers and challenges that I mentioned before, specifically finance. It has forced us to get around the table with our partners and look at what we can do to provide more access to allotments and community food growing spaces.

We pulled together a partnership in Aberdeen in which we developed a food growing strategy, and that allowed us to look at the issue from a range of angles. We put a lot of effort into not just allotments but access to food and the whole food system. We worked with Greenspace Scotland, which was great and helped us with our framework, but we also worked with an organisation called Cfine—Community Food Initiatives North East—which looks at the whole food system and provides food skills, food banks, support for community growing groups, access to land and so on. The emphasis for us initially was on how to get communities more engaged with food all the way through the process from giving people access to land, whether that is one person going to a community site, a group setting up a community site or any other activities across that spectrum. It has helped in bringing that together.

Aberdeen is also part of the national movement of Sustainable Food Places partnerships. We have a bronze award at the moment and we have put in for our silver award. That partnership also helps to look at the whole food system and who can get involved where. There has been a huge movement outside of traditional allotments—those spaces provided by the local authority where one individual or family goes to grow their food—in which community groups have popped up and done a community asset transfer or just taken on a bit of land for a little while and got involved. There has been a massive increase in that, and that includes volunteering and all the other benefits.

11:30

We are now forced, through part 9 of the act, to look at what reasonable measures we can take to

tackle our allotments waiting lists. We have recruited a full-time allotments officer, who is managing those waiting lists much more strongly than they were managed in the past. We look at our waiting list twice annually and do a cleanse, in which we contact those on the waiting list to see whether they still want to be there. We do audits of our sites three times a year to make sure that they are being used and that people have fair access to the allotments that are there. That has got a lot stronger, and we have dedicated resources working hard to make sure that the sites are well managed and accessible. We are also splitting plots and having micro plots and start-up plots and so on, as we have talked about before. That has helped in providing plots that are more usable for individuals. Not everyone wants a big tennis court sized plot; they just want somewhere to grow a few fruits and vegetables. We have micro plots and start-up plots, we are managing the sites better and we have dedicated resources managing allotments.

There is a lag period. Aberdeen has more than 1,000 people on our waiting list at the moment; five years ago, we had 150, so there has been a massive change. After Covid and the increase in awareness, we have probably plateaued and we will get a bit of a drop-off. The sites are being managed better and, once we can start bringing forward more allotment sites through the resources that we have, I think that we will see the waiting list drop. That would not happen if it was not for this duty on local authorities.

Marina Curran-Colthart: I will come in on new developments. Certainly, there are opportunities for community growing facilities within open space protection areas, and we allow that under our sustainable guidance in our local development plan. We also factor in nature in crisis, from a biodiversity point of view. There are benefits across the board, not just in terms of food but in terms of all the associated benefits for biodiversity—in particular for pollinators—and climate change. It is about place making.

What underpins it for me is the community empowerment. In Argyll, we are very much community based—small groups of people with a common interest—but we also have other factors that help with that. We have local development trusts that can help small groups develop their projects, in particular their food growing projects, with things such as going through the hassle of the planning side, engaging the community, building on the project and then having ownership. That is important.

I was listening to Peter Duncan and Ian Woolard earlier talking about the wealth of management effort that they have to put in for council-owned allotments. That is something that is quite foreign to us in Argyll and Bute. Communities have been getting up and doing it for themselves for quite a long time, but with the tools of the local development trusts in the background helping them sort out funding. The council has been there in terms of enabling and there has been mention of asset transfer, which we are particularly keen on but which comes with a lot of caveats. We are trying to make that easy for community groups so that they can succeed with their projects.

On farm diversification, there is quite a lot of interest in small crofting communities in opening up growing spaces—[*Inaudible*.]—a very traditional view. I am sure that we can all picture in our minds what an allotment looks like and the people who manage allotments. That has changed and perhaps the image of allotments needs to be updated to engage more with a lot more people and a lot more age groups. Farm diversification is certainly one way of taking the hassle out of a community and individuals being able to grow their own on the size of plot that they choose to manage.

In schools, we have ecoschools and there are also food growing programmes. A school that I visited recently in Lochgilphead had some polytunnels, and the pupils were supplying the kitchen with some fruit and vegetables and herbs and even making jam from some of the fruits of their labour. There is a culture of food growing and nutrition in the schools, but we have to ensure that it jumps the gap to home and is not just siloed in the school environment. It is for life, and that needs to come out.

Finishing my point about health and wellbeing, I note that we have a project with the Argyll and the Isles Coast and Countryside Trust called branching out, which is for people who have suffered mental illness. We started with woodlands and now we have growing plots. The health and wellbeing benefits for those people who are clients are immeasurable from being out in the fresh air and even cooking outside and tasting their own produce, which is so important. The supermarkets and other outlets cannot compete with that, so I think that there is certainly a lot more that we can do to encourage that.

In Argyll, we are not at a standing start by any means, but our culture is very different from that of councils that have allotments. We do not have an allotments officer, but we do maintain a waiting list. For our sins we have 106 people waiting for allotment spaces, and we are working with local allotment associations and with community gardens. That is one area that could be explored in order to engage people in growing their own. They see what is happening with the community garden, they have a little bit of an interest, they might help somebody out with watering if they are

away on holiday, and suddenly they are bitten by the bug. I think that a little bit of osmosis on that level goes a long way.

Amy Alcorn: I wanted to touch on the idea of how part 9 has helped. Having that legislation has really helped, because it has meant that we have had to look at our waiting lists and at how we can manage them. We have six sites across the Scottish Borders. When we studied them and looked at them thoroughly, we found that there were people on every waiting list. We have managed to do a cleanse of the waiting list and we email everybody annually to ask whether they still want to be on the waiting list for their designated area.

The other thing that we do is send people details of an interactive map that we have built for our website that shows every community garden across the Scottish Borders, as well as the allotment association-managed sites, which are separate from our own. There are five that are on Scottish Borders Council land, but they are not managed by Scottish Borders Council, whereas we have six that we manage ourselves. We gave all that information out as well as links to the local community gardens so that people have the option to choose whether they want to remain on the list or look for an alternative. We have found that most people want to stay on the list. Some people will go to a community garden, and they want that connection with their community, but the need for allotments is definitely still there. People want their own space that is not part of a community garden, where they can be by themselves and do their own gardening or their own growing.

There is a massive space for community gardens as well, as was touched on in the first session. There are some people who take on allotments but do not have horticultural experience, and community gardens are a brilliant place to introduce people who are interested in growing to a horticultural environment. Once they have been at a community garden for a few years, they may well then decide that then is the right time to apply for an allotment.

I think that community gardens and allotments can work in harmony together, but there is absolutely a need for more allotments. Our waiting list is currently equal to the amount of plots that we have, so we are definitely over the 50 per cent threshold. During the seven months that I have been here, we have created seven new plots, which are at the final point of having their fences built now that they have been cleared, and they will be offered out very soon, but there is still much work to be done to find the sites and resources to put plots into place.

Sandy Paterson: The biggest impact that we noticed with the 2015 act was the opportunity for collaboration. Previously, it was almost a case of them and us. We understand that it will be very challenging to deliver our statutory obligations under the act as a stand-alone local authority. The strength of our neighbours comes into it, and I commend Glasgow Community Food Network and all its partners for their approach and their openness with Glasgow City Council. That has been refreshing, because it helped us to identify key actions arising through an extensive engagement process that we carried out with our citizens and the local growers at the forefront of that. That developed how we shaped our approach and provided an appropriate policy position as well for food growing, particularly in relation to part 9 of the act. It is given consideration across many departments in the local authority. We now have an internal officers working group that takes in officers from many departments in the council.

We have an external stakeholders group that meets quarterly, which has developed a “Let’s grow together” fund that will encourage citizens and organisations in the city to tap into that funding stream to develop sites. It has created a web page and it provides almost a one-stop shop in Glasgow. Arising from the engagement process, we have digital mapping of land that was put forward by our citizens, and that is currently being assessed for suitability for growing. We encourage our citizens and their organisations in the city to come forward to challenge us to move forward with those sites.

It has also opened up the discussion beyond allotments to the point that we perceive growing to be a mosaic of a variety of streams and themes from community gardens through to window boxes and urban farms. Is there any reason why we cannot grow in church grounds? Is there any reason why we cannot grow in school grounds? Could universities and other landowners in the city contribute more? It has certainly upped the conversation with our housing associations in Glasgow and we have a specific group looking at supporting local housing associations to develop their own spaces. It has raised an awareness at grass-roots and political levels of the contribution that food growing can make to achieving the strategies and policies of the local authority. That is our position at this point.

Miles Briggs: You made an important point about making this about every public sector organisation looking at their land and what they can hand over, especially if it is already fenced. I think that all my questions have been covered, so I am happy to hand back.

Marie McNair: Good morning, panel. One question that has been covered by some people is the extent to which local authorities are taking a

more joined-up approach to the provision of growing spaces, recognising the contribution that allotments and community growing spaces can make to meet that demand. I know that Sandy Paterson has touched on that, but I will direct my question to Amy Alcorn.

Amy Alcorn: One of the things that you were asking about was whether we can work with our community planning partners to use their spaces for community growing. That was something that we addressed a few months ago, when we presented to the community planning partnership and then up to the strategic board to ask them to put it into their plans, so that they would look at their green spaces and start promoting them for people to access and use. That has worked with some areas in the national health service that we have been working with, such as Huntlyburn, and also with housing association land.

The housing associations that we work with in the Scottish Borders are on board with allowing their land to be used, and there is a community garden that has just started working in partnership with Abundant Borders in Selkirk that also has a partnership with the high school. It is brilliant to facilitate those groups working together and coming up with green space opportunities for local residents that would not necessarily be there without the joined-up approach of all the organisations that are on board.

11:45

Paul McLennan: Would there be a benefit in tracking nationally how many people are on the waiting lists in each area? Section 112 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 talks about people being taken off the waiting list once they have been on it for five years. What help is there for people who are on waiting lists to look at alternatives that are out there? Those questions are really about how you manage your waiting lists. I will come to Sandy Paterson first.

Sandy Paterson: In Glasgow, the management of waiting lists is currently devolved. The issue is one that we are working on, and it will be discussed as we embark on discussions with our allotment associations around rules and regulations. We have been looking at a centralised waiting list. Again, I refer back to the 2015 act and the statutory provision that it gave us, which allows us to look at information technology solutions. We have been working with a software company in the south of England that is looking to develop a package to assist with the management of our waiting lists, which will be linked to our geographic information system. That will allow people to identify plots that are available and to apply for them.

We manage our waiting lists in chronological order on a first-come, first-served basis. Anecdotally, I am advised that many of our people have been on waiting lists for up to 12 years. I am also very aware that, with other allotment sites in Glasgow, people may have to wait only two weeks. It is an interesting blend that we have, and it will be interesting to see how that pans out when we move to a centralised list.

People who are on the waiting list for longer tend to want an allotment on a specific site—they want a plot on one site and one site only. We welcome that as well, as it is in keeping with the place standard and the idea of liveable neighbourhoods. However, we like to provide as much scope and as many options as possible, so we will look at a city-wide approach to that.

We could get waiting lists down by accelerating provision, but that is difficult and not without challenges. Our networking and collaboration approach allows other organisations to seek and apply for funding that is not available to the local authorities. We can support them with that, by facilitating and signposting.

We have also been in conversation with the Glasgow Allotments Forum, which recognised that people on waiting lists were perhaps in a limbo state. It has tried to activate that by developing an organisation called the People's Plot, which pulls together like-minded folks on the waiting list to advocate for development sites. We help with that and are supportive of it.

Sinclair Laing: The waiting lists that we manage are local authority-only waiting lists, but there are private sites in Aberdeen. We have about 550 council plots and about 135 private plots. It is just the council waiting lists that we manage. We now do that through a digital process, which makes it easier for people to apply and for us to communicate with them. As Sandy Paterson said, we, too, manage the lists in a chronological way.

I do not think that we have had anyone on our waiting lists for more than five years. There might be one or two people in that position, but they will be looking for an allotment on a particular site, so they will be willing to wait a bit longer to make sure that they get somewhere closer to home or that has the facilities that they are looking for.

In relation to your question about national tracking, I absolutely agree. On any subject, having a national picture is always useful. I imagine that using the annual allotments report would be a useful way of doing that if it has standardised information that can be aggregated at a national level. Today's conversation has been useful in understanding what the contexts are in other local authorities. It sounds as though it is

quite a varied picture. That data can be looked at and drilled down into, and people will know who to contact on particular issues. If an authority is doing well, we can find out what insights it can share that we can learn from and build into our approach at local level. I very much agree with the idea of a national tracking approach.

You also asked about alternatives. We have a digital map of our allotment sites, our community growing spaces, our community growing projects and so on across the city. We use Google for that; we simply map everything that is going on. We provide that online to allotment applicants when they come in. That means that they become aware that there are other things available to them, rather than just allotments, which they might have to wait for a number of years to access. That provides information about alternatives or activities to keep them going in the meantime, which they can get involved in by getting access to a community site or developing a community site themselves, as well as other sorts of projects that are going on.

We have provided funding for school projects to develop growing on their sites. We have also encouraged workplaces to take up growing. Through our local outcomes improvement plan, we have had a three-pronged approach that involves schools growing together, communities growing together and workplaces growing together. We encourage people to get access to food growing through any route that is available to them. We have also developed new sites—community sites and council allotment sites.

There is a vast range of opportunities available to people. It is a question of making them aware of those opportunities and facilitating their access to them. That involves partnership working and funding, and encouraging the NHS and our sports facilities to make their land available for such opportunities.

Marina Curran-Colthart: In managing our waiting lists in Argyll and Bute, we have set up a kind of dating agency. We have the map—[*Inaudible*.]—opportunities are. Those are not always allotments per se; they might be community growing spaces. A lot of provisional spaces have been included in our emerging local development plans.

Again, it is a case of making sure that people on the waiting list are kept updated so that they do not go stale on us and disappear. That means that if they are no longer interested, at least they will have the opportunity to tell us that when we liaise with them and give them further information.

Paul McLennan: The next part of the question was about what help is available for projects such as community growing projects. What support and funding, as well as logistical help, is available to somebody who is looking to take on an allotment or a community garden? What more could the Scottish Government do to help you in that regard? I invite Sandy Paterson and Sinclair Laing to go first.

Sandy Paterson: As has been touched on, the biggest contribution that the Scottish Government could make would be in relation to capital and revenue. However, given that the national planning framework gives greater consideration to food growing, I fail to understand why developers are allowed to provide gardens of a size that offers no opportunity for a family to grow food on their own premises.

In addition, the regulations around structures on allotment sites are particularly off-putting to many groups. An awful lot of growers take a more holistic approach to growing, which is more about nurturing the soil and nurturing themselves, their families and their wider communities, but they come up against the regulations of the systems that local authorities and national Government have put in place, which can be difficult for many groups to navigate and very off-putting. Simplified processes and clear, simple planning regulations would certainly be of benefit.

Of course, there is the perennial issue of the availability of revenue funding to maintain sites after the initial capital to set them up has been spent. Such funding would contribute to officer resource being available to provide the support, facilitation and signposting that many of those groups encourage and welcome. The provision of revenue might just be enough to get them from the point of inception to one of empowerment.

Sinclair Laing: In Aberdeen, when the 2015 act came out and we developed our food growing strategy, we put £150,000 of capital in to support communities to bring forward community growing projects. We supported 30 projects, some of which brought forward sites. Other projects were around skills and access to food and so on. Aberdeen City Council has provided a degree of capital and revenue support, but it is limited and is not enough to meet the challenge that we face. That is not a criticism of the city council—all local authorities and public bodies face the same revenue and capital situation, given the challenges that they are trying to tackle.

We also put some money into participatory budgeting, which we encourage communities to use through locality planning and so on. We have a funding team that will support communities with any sorts of projects, including the projects that we are talking about, and will help them to access and navigate the funding landscape.

We have a community asset transfer process, in relation to which we provide guidance and hand

holding. That process is complicated and scary for anyone who does not have experience and skills on such issues. We have community learning and development staff and others who try to hold people's hands through that process.

Our environmental services, which do the operational side of land management, have turned the ship around. Historically, they would have taken a very traditional approach of mowing the grass, planting trees and providing an allotment site. On the back of the community empowerment legislation and on the back of demand and the resources that are available, there has been a change to a more community engagement-focused approach. Getting involved in such activity provides huge benefits, so supporting communities in that area reduces the revenue burden on the council and provides benefits for communities to access. Environmental services have changed their structure to provide more community support and to provide access to land, as well as doing hand holding and acting as an umbilical cord.

There is a range of support available. It will probably never be enough, but it is certainly heading in the right direction. More support is available for communities to access opportunities.

Marina Curran-Colthart: As far as on-going revenue is concerned, some of the case studies that we have in our community food growing strategy highlight the flow of income that comes from open days, sales and even more cultural things such as music and arts events, as well as the annual fees. Obviously, such events are not council run, but the associations have open days, which are a means of increasing their revenue flow. However, that is just for basic maintenance. The council will ensure that the place is still fit for purpose and will help out there. We have a goodwill fund, and we also have a suite of community development officers to help people to access other funding. Particularly in the light of the situation as regards climate change and biodiversity, it is very important that such activities are not stand alone but are integrated, as they work best when they work together.

The Convener: Amy, I do not want to put you on the spot, but I am aware that you have to leave so, rather than invite you to respond to a specific question, I would like to give you a little bit of space to tell us about anything that you want to make sure that we are aware of from the perspective of Scottish Borders Council.

Amy Alcorn: I completely concur with everything that Sinclair Laing said. There is some support available for community growers when they come to us and say that they want to start projects. The first thing that I would do is to go to see their site and find out exactly what they were looking to do. I would then work with the community engagement team to help them to secure funding to get the projects up and running. The issue with that is that that funding is usually quite a small pot of money that will get them started. After that, it is very difficult for such projects to sustain themselves, unless they are completely volunteer led.

On the bigger picture of providing more ground sites and more allotments, I had a useful meeting with the estates department, at which we looked at all its grazing lands and grazing fields and what could be available. We then started to research how much it would cost to set up a new set of allotments. We were looking at a cost of between about £40,000 and £70,000, which is money that Scottish Borders Council does not have available for this agenda.

It is incredibly important that there are resources for us to be able to deliver, because we have a brilliant strategy and brilliant legislation that encourage us to relook at the land that we have and the provisions that we make for the people who live within our constitutions, but if there is no revenue, we will struggle to provide the service that we are looking to provide. It is not that the enthusiasm is not there. The members of the team that I work with are incredibly enthusiastic about providing allotment spaces and community growing projects across the Scottish Borders; the issue is purely that there is a lack of finance.

Thank you so much for having me today. It has been a real experience for me.

12:00

The Convener: Thank you for joining us. It is good to have your perspective.

We will move on to the theme of local food growing strategies. I know that Sinclair Laing has talked about this issue quite a lot already, but I have a general question on it. I think that Aberdeen City Council has such a strategy—indeed, all the councils represented today have them—but what has been your experience of creating them? How have you brought allotments or food growing spaces into those strategies and your thinking?

Sinclair, I will start with you, as you might have more to add to what you have already said, and then I will bring in Marina Curran-Colthart and Sandy Paterson.

Sinclair Laing: The experience was very positive for us, because it gave us an opportunity to widen our thinking. Traditionally, we had an allotments forum, and in the previous 10 years, we had started to move towards more devolved management of allotment sites across the city.

Part of that was about managing the resource that is available to us, but it was also about empowering the communities to take more control and ownership of what was available to them.

Our work on the strategy built on that, but we also widened things out beyond allotments to bring in elements such as the "It's your neighbourhood" scheme and Britain in Bloom. We got around the table with a diverse group that included allotment groups, council allotment and green-space officers, Greenspace Scotland, community growing groups and so on, and we had some interesting conversations. Indeed, I would say that they drove what our strategy looked like. It was not written by the council; instead, the council facilitated and co-ordinated it, which is probably why it focuses more on community growing than on allotments. At that time, the allotments waiting list was not through the roof, as it is now. Now that times have changed, we probably need to look again at the strategy's focus, and I think that, through our reasonable measures, we are shifting from community growing back to allotments again to try to manage that waiting list.

It has been incredibly helpful to have regional partners such as Cfine, with its whole-foods system approach, and to have Greenspace Scotland on board, with its national picture and experience across a range of green-space issues. Cfine is now embedded as a strong partner in everything that we as a council do around food, be it providing summer of play food activities in schools to tackle food poverty, supporting community growing organisations through a festival in which everyone can get to meet each other and do stuff, taking on board the food growing strategy implementation group, hosting the sustainable food partnership and so on. All these things have catalysed around the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and the Sustainable Food Places approach.

On the whole, our experience has been positive and the strategy has been really great for community growing, but we probably need to refocus slightly on allotments.

The Convener: I had been thinking, "Okay, there's a strategy, but what does it look like on the ground?", but one of the things that I gleaned from your response and which it is great to hear is that you have a food growing strategy implementation group. In other words, the strategy is not just sitting in some digital dusty cupboard but is having an impact on the ground.

Marina, how is your food growing strategy going?

Marina Curran-Colthart: Our strategy is doing quite well. I work in development policy, so we put together a development policy team and brought in others from development management, legal and community services to cover all the people with whom we wanted to engage. We had a group of stakeholders that included community councils, development trusts and any existing allotment associations and community gardens that we knew of. Obviously we did not have the full picture, so it was an incredibly good exercise to find out where things were happening across Argyll. The community councils certainly came into their own in that respect.

As for the food growing strategy, we basically want to empower communities and individuals to join forces. Allotments do not happen just off the bat of one individual; they work best when there is a community involved. We have a series of food festivals, and we have the food from Argyll initiative, which was in existence long before the strategy. That initiative is supported by businesses and community groups, and it is a good vehicle for encouraging people to add to the approach that we are taking and to support the whole of Argyll.

The one thing that I have not mentioned is our 23 inhabited islands. With climate change, some of the ferries not playing ball with the weather conditions and—[*Inaudible.*]—the islands as well in terms of growing food. A lot of them have adopted sheltered areas to be able to do that. In that respect, I would highlight in particular Islay, Colonsay, Tiree, Coll and, of course, Mull. We are also very much in tune with what you might call a siege mentality and ensuring that we have enough in the store to keep us going. Indeed, that sort of thing is well settled in our culture.

As I have said, we have worked across the board on this. At the moment, though, I am working with two other colleagues based in the asset transfer unit who have experience not just in estates but also in legal services. We are monitoring what is happening with our food strategy, but we are very well aware that it will have to be updated in the next few years. We adopted ours in 2020, which means that it will need to be updated in 2025.

We have been collecting further information on that, but something that I think has not been mentioned is how we deal with food security at a more local level. One of the groups in Oban runs Hope Kitchen, and it has an allotment—or, I should say, a food growing space—within a walled garden in the town. It has been particularly successful in getting funding, engaging with volunteers and playing an educational role as well as meeting the needs of those who are less fortunate. Certainly, it has been quite creative in keeping its funding going and ensuring that it remains sustainable, and it is to be applauded for that.

The Convener: Thank you, Marina. When I visited Hope Kitchen, I was taken to see that fantastic garden. What those people are doing there is absolutely incredible.

Going back to your comment about the need to update the food strategy, I would just mention the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, which is going through Parliament at the moment and will require local authorities to put in place good food nation plans. At some point, some thought will need to be given to how the food growing strategies and the plans work together. Sandy, would you like to talk about your perspective from the allotment side of things and how you got involved with the Glasgow city's food growing strategy, if there is one?

Sandy Paterson: There most certainly is a Glasgow food growing strategy; it was published in 2020. It was developed through engagement with Greenspace Scotland, and Glasgow City Council played a stakeholder role in the process instead of being a driver in it, which gave us an opportunity to listen to what citizens were saying. That work developed into a food growing strategy with 16 high-level actions to allow the city to deliver more growing spaces and to support growers.

On the allotments side of things, we will continue to work on our annual allotments reports, but we understand that the food growing strategy supersedes the requirement for an allotments strategy per se, which is perhaps where the confusion that Peter Duncan touched on earlier has arisen. We see the strategy as a much wider conversation than the allotments conversation, which is very specific and very focused. The strategy provides scope for a much broader range of food growing opportunities to be available to the citizens of the city. Not everyone wants to grow on an allotment; some people find the allotment rules and regulations quite restrictive compared with the creative processes that they might be able to apply in community gardens such as vertical growing, hydroponics, aquaponics, regenerative agriculture and other such approaches that are much sought after in Glasgow and which certainly make a positive impact to our climate and ecological emergency declarations.

The strategy provides an opportunity for us to have a conversation around, for example, the health of soils and how they can contribute to carbon sequestration from atmospheric and sea-water carbon through to soil organic carbon. There is also a conversation to be had about health and wellbeing, too. Five general practitioner surgeries in the Drumchapel area of Glasgow are now referring citizens through community link practitioners to the Growchapel site; it is almost as if gardening is being prescribed as a form of stress reduction, because it gives people an opportunity for reflection and takes away the buzz of everyday life.

The strategy has also contributed to the development of the community elements of the Glasgow city food plan, which sets out a whole-food system approach under six different themes. It has been excellent to see how private, public and third sector organisations have been activated and have come together to develop that plan, which contributes to the overall city development frameworks, too.

The 16 key actions of the food growing strategy can be summed up under four main themes: increased growing spaces; increased and improved sources of information; support for greater network and information sharing; and support for policy and process improvements. That is something that we will definitely deliver as part of the food growing strategy.

Sinclair Laing talked about setting up an implementation group. We have such a thing in Glasgow, too—the Glasgow community food growers forum, which not only monitors the delivery of the food growing strategy but actively participates in the delivery of the actions arising from it. It is a network of stakeholders from allotments associations, community gardens and other forms of growing in the city, and it includes the external officers group that we have mentioned and which brings in other partners from the NHS, local housing associations, health improvement co-ordinators, Police Scotland and so on. We also have an internal officers group that draws internal officers together to ensure that the conversation happens across the whole council, not just on the parks development side of things.

The Convener: It is very heartening to hear that so many different departments, groups and organisations are involved in the city food plan. Twenty years ago, I was working extensively in community food growing in New York, and at that time, there was not the same level of awareness and understanding that everybody needs to get behind that kind of work and to realise the massive benefits that it can bring to a city.

Marie McNair has a few more questions to ask.

Marie McNair: This has been touched on by others, but I wonder whether Sandy Paterson can say a little bit about how local authorities can help allotments to thrive in communities where there are low levels of volunteering.

Sandy Paterson: That is a very difficult question to answer, but I would just highlight my earlier comment about community links practitioners and their unique position in local GP surgeries. I understand that there is a correlation between people who are termed "hard to reach" and those who show up at GP surgeries, but

community link practitioners are ideally placed to look at a person-centred approach to health and wellbeing, to open a conversation with those people about, say, whether they have ever considered food growing, whether they have ever been part of an allotment or even whether they have ever had a walk in a park and to highlight all of the other indirect benefits that we get from our open spaces. That is certainly one way of doing it.

The other approach that we take is to raise awareness by continually talking to people, advocating these things, giving presentations to area partnership committees, our elected members and our community planning partnerships and attending conferences. You will find grass-roots organisations in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage—indeed, Drumchapel is a great example of that. Our Growchapel site came about from the work of the quality of life group that was chaired by Police Scotland, which found that people were dropping into the gaps between health and social care partnerships and the criminal justice system. It was not criminal behaviour as such, but it was manifesting as what could be criminal behaviour, and you would generally find that there was a mental health issue at the back of it.

As a result, we looked at an underutilised piece of open space in an area of socioeconomic disadvantage and started an engagement process. There was a massive response in favour of developing that land into a growing space, and I believe that 35 organisations are now involved in Growchapel. Each has access to the site and brings in their own user groups, who are then able to access a site that they might never have been aware of before.

In short, awareness raising and the use of community links practitioners in GP surgeries are ways of getting to areas of low volunteering and encouraging people to volunteer. Indeed, you will find that, even if they do not volunteer, that sort of thing happens in a secondary way. Once you have educated people about growing and once they get enthused about its benefits, those who have a fair bit of time available will start to contribute more to the site.

Marie McNair: We were in Springburn yesterday, and I was amazed to find that, although we were in the middle of a housing estate, you just did not know it once you got into the allotment. You could have been anywhere. To be honest, I was quite chilled there.

Sinclair Laing touched on this issue earlier, but how can the planning system be better used to ensure adequate provision is made for new and existing community growers? Would you like to throw anything else in there, Sinclair?

12:15

Sinclair Laing: Before I answer that, I want to touch on an issue that was raised previously. In its food banks, Cfine engages with people who come in with regard to food insecurity to see whether there might be an opportunity for them to get involved in volunteering and growing their own food. There is a bit of a stepping-stone approach in that respect.

Interestingly, as far as planning is concerned, colleagues of mine have certainly made it clear that planning can probably do more on this matter. Historically, growing sites and green spaces are protected under local planning policy, but they are probably not protected strongly enough. We are now using mapping much more, partly as a result of part 9 of the 2015 act, to provide a map for food growing potential, but we are now linking that activity with the open space audits and strategies that are coming through the planning system, too.

It was suggested that we bring together the mapping for food growing and the mapping for general green space across local authority areas, and we are doing that. That had been delayed since the publication of the food growing strategy, because our open space audit was not done at the same time. However, we have tweaked the way that we are approaching the matter, and we are now looking at all the publicly accessible land across Aberdeen over a certain size and asking, “What is the potential for that land to be used for food growing?” Once we have that data, we can start drilling down, mapping things out a bit more and building all that into our local development plan for the next time around.

It is not an immediate solution, but we are starting to build this sort of thing much more into the planning process. Colleagues have suggested that more could be done under the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 to make the link between food growing and planning; however, although there are some things in there that might be used, the provisions on open space as a whole, play and other things are much stronger than those on food. Perhaps there is an opportunity to look at how that aspect might be strengthened through the new framework.

That we have not had huge success in bringing forward food growing sites through planning is, to say the least, disappointing. Given the significant growth that Aberdeen has experienced over the past 10 to 15 years, not having those sites is a missed opportunity, but we might be able to take another look at how we manage the planning process and things such as local place plans and how we engage with communities so that they understand that they have, through food and locality plans, opportunities to try to strengthen

that approach and ensure that it gets built into the next local development plan.

It is well and good putting all that into policy, but we also have to deliver it, which means that our planners need to push developers and others to bring sites forward. Perhaps there needs to be a bit of education not just for our planners on development management, but for developers on how to bring forward those kinds of sites in the planning process.

Sandy Paterson: Expanding on Sinclair Laing's comment about developers bringing forward growing sites, I would just highlight the perennial question of maintenance and revenue after a site has been handed over, and I would suggest that that remain a crucial consideration in planning policies.

Marie McNair: Going back to yesterday's visit, I understand that Glasgow is going to add a further 250 growing spaces—correct me if I have that figure wrong. Can you expand on that? How many are traditional allotments and how many are growing spaces?

Sandy Paterson: We are looking to add 259 plots through this iteration of the food growing strategy, and there are 23 electoral wards that we are looking to adapt growing spaces in. Some of those spaces will be on pre-existing sites where space has not been utilised to its maximum efficiency; some will be on new sites; and some will be on vacant and derelict land. Each of the growing formats that will be utilised will essentially be determined by the site that we develop. In other words, if the space is allotments, it will generally stay a traditional allotments site; if it is on vacant and derelict land where there might be contamination issues, we might very well use an accessible raised bed format; and if it is a new site, it will generally follow the traditional allotments format.

We are also looking at a blend of community aspects within allotments. Allotments have to a certain degree been siloed in as much as they are just for individuals, but there is a community of place and shared experience there, too. That will lead to other developments in the community, and although it might not be everybody's cup of tea to have a 250m^2 plot—an individual might be looking for something a little bit less restrictive and rigid—there is still space in allotments sites for that sort of approach. Indeed, that has certainly been considered in the Growchapel site, which is the newest one that we have opened. There are plots for individuals, plots for organisations, small starter plots, medium plots and larger plots, and all of that allows a life cycle to develop. An introductory grower comes in and starts on a small plot; they prove their case there; and then they move up to another plot.

That has led to an increased demand for urban farming, too, which is something that we are currently exploring with our economic development team and our partners in the Glasgow Community Food Network. Moreover, we are looking at vertical growing through technological solutions from an organisation called Intelligent Growth Solutions, which has a research and development strand up at the James Hutton Institute in Invergowrie.

There is a massive mosaic of different growing techniques that we are keen to explore and develop in Glasgow, and our approach will involve a blend of all of them. It will not just be traditional allotments; there will be community gardens, technology-led innovations and the regenerative agriculture approach to urban farming that we are looking at for the city.

The Convener: That brings us to the end of our questions and what has been a very useful discussion. I think that one of the things that has come out of this and the earlier session is the question of how we get people started younger on this sort of activity and how we hardwire it into the education system. What I am hearing is that, at the moment, people are faced with a large plot and do not know what to do with it; however, they still have that impulse and know that it is something that could bring them benefit. If we could get that going in schools, things might become more consistent. I know from my work in the past that a particular challenge is the summer holidays, when suddenly there is nobody to water the vegetable plot at peak growing period.

I thank the witnesses for joining us this morning and their very useful evidence. As that was the last item in public on our agenda today, I close this part of the meeting.

12:21

Meeting continued in private until 12:33.

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