OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 14 June 2022

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Tuesday 14 June 2022

CONTENTS

LOCAL GOVERNMENT, HOUSING AND PLANNING COMMITTEE
19th 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:

Karen Birch (Abundant Borders)
Maria de la Torre (Knocknagael Limited)
Ian Welsh
Rosanne Woods (Tranent Allotment Association)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Euan Donald

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 14 June 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Ariane Burgess): Good morning, and welcome to the 19th meeting in 2022 of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. I ask 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 consideration of a decision on taking in private items 3 and 4. Are we agreed to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Allotments

10:00

The Convener: The next item on our agenda is consideration of evidence on the impact of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 on allotments and community food growing. This is the last of three evidence sessions that the committee is holding as part of its inquiry.

We will discuss the topic today with a panel of witnesses who each submitted a written response to our call for views last month. They represent allotments, community groups and community food growers. Our witnesses are Karen Birch, who is the co-founder and chair of Abundant Borders; Ian Welsh, who is an allotment user; Rosanne Woods from the Tranent Allotment Association; and Maria de la Torre, who is the chair of Knocknagael Ltd. I welcome all our witnesses to the meeting; Karen, Ian and Maria are joining us remotely. For the record, I highlight that, as an MSP, I have recently been supporting Knocknagael Ltd in using the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 to transfer land from the Scottish Government.

It would be helpful if members would direct their questions to a specific witness where possible, although I will be happy to bring in other witnesses who wish to contribute. If a witness wishes to comment, they should indicate their desire to do so to me or the clerk and I will bring them in at an appropriate point. Karen, Ian and Maria, please type an R in the BlueJeans chat function to indicate your desire to come in.

I open the session to questions from members, and I will begin. The first theme is on costs and benefits, and I will start with a broad question about barriers to accessing allotments. Throughout our evidence sessions and site visits, we have seen the challenges that allotment owners and associations have faced and overcome; likewise, we have heard about challenges that local authorities have faced in providing allotments. Identifying barriers to access is a crucially important part of the post-legislative scrutiny that the committee is undertaking. Given that, I am keen to hear your experiences of what the main barriers to accessing allotments and community growing spaces are. I will start with Ian and then go to Rosanne.

Ian Welsh: Good morning. My focus is on what is happening in cities. From what I can gather, the current waiting lists in Glasgow and Edinburgh—and Fife, probably—amount to something like 10,000, which is significantly more than the number of plots that are available in those places. Fife Council has taken a proactive approach for a

number of years and, from 2007, has increased its number of plots. Edinburgh and Glasgow councils have done a certain amount, and they have passed the trigger point in the legislation.

One of the problems is that the trigger point, which is when the number of applicants reaches more than 50 per cent of the number of plots that a council operates, was to be delayed by eight years, but the actual trigger point is eight years after regulations have been set. Regulations were meant to be set in 2020, but, as I understand it, in Glasgow, they have yet to be agreed and introduced. That has added a further delay to the process.

The Convener: Just out of curiosity, do you have an understanding of why the delay was put into the legislation?

Ian Welsh: Formerly, I was president of the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society. With other committee members, I was involved in negotiating with the Scottish Government on the details of part 9 of the 2015 act. We then became part of the tripartite group, which included four representatives from the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society, four representatives from councils—namely, Glasgow, Edinburgh, North Ayrshire and Fife—and officials from the Scottish Government.

At the time, we thought that eight years would be a reasonable period to allow councils to prepare. There was a clear cost implication and, as we all know, councils have been struggling to meet costs for many years. I recently retired from a ground services or parks operation, and those are often connected to allotments. We knew what the budget situation was and, obviously, creating new sites requires funding. The resource that councils might have is land, but there is often an issue with finding funds to develop it.

There has been success, in that many sites have been created, mainly in rural council areas. In 2007, we published a survey of where Scotland's allotments were, and there were 6,500 at that time. That coincided with an upsurge in interest from people looking to have allotments in their area. For example, in Langholm down in the Borders, there were no allotments and had not been any for many years. Groups became constituted and then negotiated with the council or other landowners, often obtaining funds from lottery sources or the climate challenge fund, to create the infrastructure that was needed to create sites. Since 2007, probably around another 2,000 plots have been created as a result of that kind of action.

In the cities, the problem is that people submit their name to a waiting list—it might be for a council site, a self-managed site on council land or a completely independent site such as mine—and then simply languish on that waiting list until the association or council can offer them a vacant plot. I understand that my site, which has 50 plots, now has a waiting list of around 130. The turnover that we have experienced in recent years indicates that it could take five years simply to work our way through the first 30 or so people on the list.

It is very difficult for an association, whether it is independent or managing a site on behalf of a council, to create a new site or to represent the people who are on the waiting list. The problem is that the people on the waiting lists are not necessarily members of an organisation; they are simply individuals who are waiting for the letter to appear to offer them a plot and, in many instances, that could take many years.

The Convener: It is interesting to hear that there was a desire to allow councils eight years to give them time to prepare. In the meantime, we have had things such as Covid, which have resulted in an upsurge in interest and even more desire for people to get a patch for growing food.

Rosanne, what is your experience in Tranent? Is it similar or are other things going on there?

Rosanne Woods (Tranent Allotment Association): We have 34 plots—six of them are community plots and the rest are all individual. Our waiting list is currently at 34, which seems a lot, but only nine people have not actually been offered a plot. If people are offered a plot and cannot take it for some reason, we give them the chance to go back on the list, but down at the bottom. If somebody is offered a plot and does not reply, we will put them to the bottom of the list, but, if they do not reply twice, they will be off the list.

Just before Covid, we had nobody waiting for a plot, but Covid has sent the demand through the roof. We operate the allotments ourselves. It used to be done by the council, but it does not have the manpower. The chap retired and the council set up the association. We do everything: we do the allocating and make sure that the plots are kept up and looked after. I know that the 2015 act specifies a trigger point of 50 per cent of plots, but, as I said, our position is not too bad. The waiting time is about two years. The person at the top has been waiting for two years now.

The likelihood that people will give up has reduced since Covid, I think. People cherish their allotments. I know that the site in Musselburgh has closed its waiting list. It has 64 plots and it closed the list when that got to more than 100. I think that its waiting time is about 10 years. There are frequently complaints in the paper, but there is nothing that it can do. I know that it has started to halve its plots. We have half-plots, too, and it is manageable. Nobody thinks that they should have

a bigger plot, and some people do struggle with those.

Maria de la Torre (Knocknagael Limited): Thank you for the opportunity to be here. I want to raise a different issue about a different barrier. We are based in Inverness, where there are only two allotment sites. One has 60 spaces and the other has 30. The larger one is rented from Highland Council and the other one is rented from a private developer on a short-term lease. Inverness has about 51,000 inhabitants and is a growing city.

I highlight that a key issue is access to land for allotments and community builds. Our experience, as a community group that has been looking to acquire a site that is owned by the Scottish Government and is part of the Scottish bull farm, has been that we face an incredible number of barriers in trying to develop the project. The issue is not just the running of the existing allotment sites, but how access to land can be facilitated to ensure that we can provide sites as we move forward, and that we have these community spaces.

Karen Birch (Abundant Borders): We look at it in a different way. As the committee has heard, when councils are looking for allotment plots, it is a question of finding quite large pieces of land. They are probably looking for sufficient land to put on maybe 20 allotments as a minimum. That will be quite a large piece of land. It is also very resource intensive to run allotments, because everybody wants a shed and their own area for storage, and a lot of community pathways are needed to access all the different allotments. Having an allotment site is actually quite a big ask.

We look at things very differently because we focus on the creation of community gardens, which do not need such massive amounts of space in order to satisfy the food-growing ambitions of a larger number of people. An allotment site for 20 people will be quite a big piece of land. We have community garden spaces that are less than an acre, and we may have 20 people growing food collectively on that piece of land.

Taking that approach—we are in the Scottish Borders—we have not had any difficulty in accessing pieces of land in order to do community food growing. That has been done through the council, which has established a green spaces team and is looking to make more and more pieces of land available.

However, the biggest success has been the provision through housing associations. Making community growing spaces available satisfies the needs of their tenants, but it also builds community in the area, because people become involved in keeping part of, for example, a housing development nice and tidy as a community recreation space as well as a food-growing space.

Despite the title of the committee's inquiry, we do not have a huge amount to say about allotments, but we have quite a different approach to the availability of green spaces and the possibilities of food growing within communities.

10:15

The Convener: Thanks, Karen. It is great to get your perspective and hear about your innovations with regard to community growing spaces, but from what everyone is saying it seems that it is in our cities that tensions are arising, because there is not so much growing space.

Maria de la Torre has sort of pre-empted my second question, which is about the support and facilitation being provided by the Scottish Government and local authorities, but perhaps I can pick up the same theme with Karen Birch and Ian Welsh. What can the Scottish Government and the local authorities do to better support allotments and, indeed, community growing spaces? Karen, do you want to come in on that?

Karen Birch: Yes, I am happy to come in on that.

What Scottish Borders Council came up with in the food growing strategy that it had to create under the overall legislation was not, in our opinion, a food growing strategy as such but a comprehensive community food growing strategy. It has now created a community food growers network and a green spaces team, which is looking at how we can make that kind of space available.

I do not think that anywhere in the Borders could really be described as an urban area, but I understand that there are waiting lists in the population centres such as Hawick and Galashiels. However, more and more community space is becoming available to people, and we need to be creative in the way in which we look at food growing and how we actually involve people.

For example, the first community food growing site that we established in Eyemouth is a half plot on the allotment, and we now have five people growing food on that small plot. That has helped not only those who are on the waiting list but those who might be unsure about taking on an allotment space, because we have been able to give them the skills and help them to build their confidence before they take on a larger space. As a result of that engagement, people have not dropped off the waiting list as readily, and we have now taken on a much bigger community space just outwith the allotments in Eyemouth. Again, that will act not only as a true community growing space with

volunteers supporting community growing but as a training centre for people who still want to have their own space and grow things in their own way.

We can be creative in blending community growing spaces. There is a waiting list for the allotments in Eyemouth, but there are also spaces that have become overgrown, because people have not been able to maintain them, and there must be something that the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society can do that gives people the opportunity to learn and make things good, without expecting perfection in the first year. It might be three or four years before a person gives up their plot, but if we can be creative in helping people who think that they want an allotment get the skills to grow their own food, that will improve the success of allotmenteers themselves.

The Convener: The issue of skilling up people is a theme that has been coming through clearly.

Ian Welsh, do you have any thoughts on how local authorities and the Scottish Government can be better facilitators?

Ian Welsh: With regard to the waiting lists in our cities, the answer is to find a way to communicate more directly with the people who are on the waiting lists. From my past involvement with both the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society and the Glasgow Allotments Forum, I know that site secretaries often have concerns about contravening anything to do with data protection by passing names on to other organisations. However, somebody has to find a way to alert the people who are on the waiting lists, particularly for a site like mine. If we could do that, we might choose write to them to say that they are, for example, number 41 on our list of 130, that it is unlikely that we can offer them a plot in a reasonably meaningful period of time, and that they need to get together with other like-minded people, form an identifiable group and identify themselves with a location.

It is interesting that Eyemouth was mentioned—Eyemouth was one of the self-start groups to which I alluded. It started after 2005 and it has been going for 10 or more years now. It started from scratch before the legislation came into play.

There are other issues to do with the status of many allotment associations, which are usually unincorporated associations, which need to be clarified. Perhaps there might be an opportunity later to come back to that.

Where the large waiting lists occur, the main thing is to find a way to encourage people to empower themselves and make use of the legislation, because they do not know or understand the situation that they are currently in.

The Convener: Thank you. You made a good point about getting people together so that they can empower themselves.

Maria de la Torre: I want to add to what I said earlier, and this perhaps follows on quite well from the previous comments. Local authorities are under a lot of pressure now, and it is difficult for them to run allotments sites, but they can play a key role in facilitating the process by which groups are able to acquire land and, in particular, in brokering relationships with other public organisations. One of the gaps in the legislation is that it covers only local authorities and does not extend to other public organisations that might hold land that could be provided for food growing. That is an area that could be improved.

In our case, it is quite difficult to believe that there is a Scottish Government-owned bull farm in the middle of Inverness—one would have thought that there is scope for it to provide for the community and to collaborate with the community that lives there. We have faced so many barriers in taking the project forward. That is partly due to the lack of a culture of working closely with the community.

That is another important point to get across: we need a culture that is about collaborating with communities to help them to take forward such projects. We need more spaces to provide for allotments and food growing, to help with some of the waiting lists that we have.

The Convener: Thank you. Rosanne, would you like to come in?

Rosanne Woods: We are quite lucky in Tranent, I have just realised. We have six community plots; the food bank has recently taken on one, as has an organisation called Home-Start East Lothian, which is for young families that are struggling. As well as having the allotment plot, Home-Start is based in one of the local schools, which has a big garden. Most of the schools in Tranent now have a big garden where they grow stuff, and they ask us or Home-Start for help.

We also help East Lothian Roots and Fruits, which is a co-op that recently got a garden. We all collaborate with each other. From listening to people, I think that that is sort of unique. For example, we also help Ormiston Grows and there is a community garden in Tranent, so if people ask how long they have to wait, we tell them that they can try Ormiston Grows, which has smaller raised beds, or they can go to the community garden where people can go for a couple of hours every week—they will not have their own plot, but they can help to grow things.

There are lots of things that people are involved in, and they keep in touch. We are quite lucky in Tranent.

The Convener: We will move on to a new theme, which Miles Briggs will introduce.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Good morning to the panel. Thank you for joining us.

The witnesses have touched on a lot of the questions that I wanted to ask. However, I want to get more details about the auditing of current plots. Ian Welsh mentioned splitting plots. To what extent has the legislation meant that councils have done such work and have looked at how the current maximum capacity is utilised? Has that been done, or have we basically just developed waiting lists?

Ian Welsh: I am not absolutely up to speed on the current situation. I have spoken to representatives of the GAF and the Federation of Edinburgh and District Allotments and Gardens Associations recently to glean a little about what is currently going on, and I think that there have been attempts to halve plots in some instances. My own site did that a few years ago, and it was then found that other people who were coming in wanted to recombine them. Our plots are around 200m^2 and nearly all of them have a hut and/or glasshouse on them. That can sometimes make them a bit difficult to split.

I am sorry—I had better stick to your question.

One issue is that although plots can be halved, all that does is cram more people on to the same amount of land. The size of the allotment that we tried to get in the legislation was established at the end of the first world war. That was the size of a piece of ground that would enable a household group of four people to meet most of their fruit and vegetable needs. In the current climate and the climate that we might be moving into in the near future, that need could remain as relevant as it was then.

The other benefits that come from an allotment, such as social interaction, better diet, meeting people, and the effects on people's mental health, will all come from being involved in something that uses up a reasonable amount of people's time. Looking after a few square metres will have benefits for people—for many people, that might be all that they require—but it will not produce the amount of food that an allotment plot of 200m^2 or thereabouts would.

I do not know whether that answers your question.

Miles Briggs: That is helpful. Does anyone else want to come in on that point?

Rosanne Woods: When we were taking on the allotments, the association that was set up had a chairperson, but he could not do that work because a lot of work was involved. Nobody wanted to do that work, so I was asked to take it on. I said that I would do so only if I had the right to get rid of neglected plots. We did that and, thankfully, the council supported us. We had around eight neglected plots. That was horrendous. I had one beside mine that was never taken care of for eight years.

We are quite strict. We have two inspections every year, one of which is in June. I already know that there are two plots that are neglected. Those people will be given 28 days to start to do work on them. We do not want the plots to be perfect, but we want the weeds to be cut down. If that is not done, those people will have a further two weeks before they are evicted. We have done that. That is only fair, because we have a big waiting list. If people are growing things, it is not fair to have a neglected plot beside theirs because it does not help. I think that the fact that we evict people is quite unusual.

Karen Birch: To go back to what I said earlier, we need to be much more creative.

10:30

As Ian Welsh said, a lot of the thinking about the science of allotments and why people have them relates to the post-first world war period, when people wanted a sustainable plot for growing fruit and veg for the whole family. From our experience of talking to people on allotments and elsewhere—we are supporting a couple of blended sites, too—that is no longer what people are doing with their allotment, and it might not be their main driver for having an allotment site. We therefore need to be more creative about the size of sites.

Again, as Ian Welsh said, everybody will use some of their site for a glasshouse and a seating area. We need to think creatively about that too, because there is a lot of non-food growing space on allotments. We would be able to let people have more growing space if, for example, we were to say that there was a community glasshouse or tool-storage area. In that case, half a plot might be sufficient for someone, because they would not need to put a shed on it.

That is probably outwith the scope of the discussions, so I apologise if I am taking the discussion in a slightly random direction. However, a lot of the thinking on allotments goes back a long way, so we need to be more creative in thinking about growing spaces in order to tackle neglected plots and waiting lists.

Miles Briggs: Thank you—that is a good point. We have seen allotments with communal composting areas, for example, which helps to prevent replication from everyone having a composting space on their allotment.

With regard to using other parts of the 2015 act, do you have any examples of where common good land is now being facilitated—touching on what you said earlier—to provide smaller starter plots with raised beds? People can see if they really want to have an allotment first, and they can then transition to having half a plot or a full plot. Has the 2015 act helped to develop that approach in any way?

Karen Birch: I cannot answer that directly—I can only talk from my recent experience, since the development of the community food growing strategy in the Scottish Borders. There is a renewed determination to make pieces of land available and to undertake a mapping exercise to see what land is there—[*Inaudible*.]—and what facilities already exist on it, and what the cost would be for bringing it into community ownership and use. That has recently made a difference down here in the Borders.

As I mentioned, we are engaging with housing associations, because they are also major landowners. That approach has been very productive down here with regard to acquiring small spaces. In rural communities, it is often difficult for people to get to a larger site. It is fine for someone who lives somewhere like Hawick, where they can walk to an allotment site, but a big allotment site would not be built in a rural community. In Reston, for example, where I live, the number of people is not sufficient for an allotment site to be built. We are looking for smaller pieces of ground to be part of the community, rather than people having to travel to a central site in Eyemouth or where-have-you. The strategy has certainly made a difference to our thinking.

Rosanne Woods: I send people to Ormiston Grows, which has raised beds of various sizes. The problem is, however, that the site is not very secure.

Maria de la Torre: In Inverness, we have examples of some community spaces that are being used by Incredible Edible Inverness: small areas in the town centre are being used to grow food.

The key aspect that I want to bring up is that, when thinking about allotments, it is critical to think about the quality of the land. One of the reasons that we put forward Knocknagael as a community growing area is because a field was already being used for growing vegetables and the land was really good for that purpose. Not all common good land might be appropriate, and it is important to consider using sites that are good for growing food, for allotments and for community growing purposes.

The Convener: That is a really important point—if we have got good land, let us grow food on it.

We will move on to another theme. I do not know whether Mark Griffin still has questions on waiting lists and trigger points.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Yes. My questions are on waiting lists, demand and communication between authorities and those on waiting lists. We have had quite a bit of discussion about that, so I probably know the answer to this but, generally, what is demand like? How many people are on the waiting list in your area? How has that changed since the 2015 act? I come to Rosanne Woods first.

Rosanne Woods: I have been doing the waiting lists for—gee whiz—only four years, so I cannot tell you what things were like before then. The waiting list that I was given was a bit of a guddle. It had people on it who had left the area years ago. Since Covid, we have got nine new people and we have probably allocated four new plots. We usually have quite a turnover every year, but that has not been the case since Covid, because the allotment gave people a place to go.

Mark Griffin: Would any of the online witnesses like come in at this point?

Maria de la Torre: I am aware that, in Inverness, about 80 people are waiting. The waiting list for one site in Blackthorn has closed because they cannot cope with any more requests.

We have done our own investigations. About a year and a half or two years ago, we did a community survey, which took place over only one month, and about 165 people expressed an interest. We know that, because of the pandemic, demand has increased, so I would say that we are aware of hundreds of people waiting to get an allotment in our area.

Ian Welsh: That was one of the things that I was checking on, to update the figures that I stated in my submission. I understand that Edinburgh's current waiting list is 5,496. That figure has more than doubled since my involvement with SAGS's committee, which is going back three or four years.

The situation in Glasgow is a bit more difficult to know, because it might be that only local authority sites are taken into account. Apparently, at the end of April, 13 sites had responded, registering 1,331 applications. Eight sites had still to respond and another 12 sites are, like my site, private and independent. The likely waiting list for Glasgow is 1,800-plus. We do not know how many people on our list of 130 also have their names on the council's list. Equally, many people who are on our

list might also be on the list of Holmlea Gardens Allotments, in Cathcart. That is another independent site, about a quarter of a mile from ours. That duplication is always quoted as an unknown factor.

That should not, however, be the reason for delaying doing something. The process of engaging with people—getting them involved and getting them to go through the process of getting the site themselves—has the effect of weeding out, to some extent, the people who might decide that it is not for them. That can happen, eventually, when people get on to a site—as has been indicated and as seems to have happened at Eyemouth.

Encapsulated in that situation is the relationship between the people of Scotland and the land of Scotland, particularly when it comes to working the land. We have become disengaged from that over a number of generations. That relates to other issues about people not really understanding where food comes from and how it is produced, because they think that it all comes out of the supermarket. Getting more people involved in growing can help with those issues.

Mark Griffin: I want to touch on communication with people on waiting lists and what local authorities can do to identify duplications on waiting lists. Ian Welsh, you touched on data protection issues, but there are ways around everything. For example, if allotment associations asked people for permission to share the data, could local authorities play a bigger role by having a comprehensive, local authority-level waiting list? In that way, with applicants' permission, councils could co-ordinate waiting lists and encourage incorporation, perhaps looking at particular sites where authorities own land. That does not seem to be beyond possibility, provided that people give their permission to share the data.

Ian Welsh: The Glasgow Allotments Forum started back in 2005 and changed the relationship between the plot holders and the council; it resulted in the appointment of an allotment officer. At the time, I was treasurer of my own association, so I had access to the waiting list. At a reasonably early stage of the process, I counted up how many were on the list—I think that it was about 50—and I selected information to give to the allotment officer. I gave that to him in the form of, "We have 50 people on our waiting list. Ten of them are in G42, 8 of them are in G43" and so on. I think that knowing that helped him to make a decision and justified the reopening of a site at Croftfoot in Glasgow. That might be one way to do it. However, that involves passing information on to somebody who will take it forward and implement it. I fear that, in some situations, the only way that that will happen is by people taking action themselves—community empowerment. That is what the legislation is supposed to be about.

The Convener: Thanks, Ian. I really love your contributions. I love what you said earlier about the importance of allotments being about the relationship between the people of Scotland and the land of Scotland—not just the land but working the land. I think that there is some truth in that, and we are aware of that in the committee.

I will bring in Willie Coffey, who joins us online.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Good morning. Before I ask a few questions about guidance on the 2015 act and the 250m^2 assumption—[*Inaudible*]—on whether people who are on the waiting list are participating in other projects such as community garden spaces and so on.

The reason why I ask is that East Ayrshire does not have any allotments, they tell me, and it does not have anybody applying, but there are a number of examples of community garden spaces here, there and everywhere. Ian, you said there were 5,400 or so people on waiting lists in Edinburgh and maybe 1,800 in Glasgow. Are those people participating by other means or are they just not able to do so at all? What is the picture?

10:45

Ian Welsh: The basic thing that you have to assume is that if someone applies for an allotment, it is an allotment they want. However, there is room for lots of misunderstanding. I have been aware from many years of watching television programmes and news bulletins that the term "allotment" is used, but what is presented visually is not an allotment. I do not think that I understood it myself when I took on my plot back in 1976, and it has been a long learning curve.

That is the problem. If you do not personally know people, you might not necessarily know what they might already be involved in. We have to assume that they have some basic understanding of what an allotment is. I did not know about the definition and all the different bits of legislation that used to be behind it, but when I went to the site in response to the letter that invited me to come and be offered an allotment, what I saw was what I expected an allotment to be. It was not a surprise to me.

When the previous Local Government and Regeneration Committee took evidence from us, some of the members of the Scottish Parliament came to Glasgow and visited a number of sites, including the housing association site in Govan. They also visited my site, and we were fortunate because we had two women members who gave

their testimony at that meeting. At that point, they had had their plots for less than five years, and they said that, when they came in, they thought the plots looked really big and they did not think that they would be able to cope with them. Now we have reached the stage where they reckon that they do not have enough ground to grow everything that they want to grow. Those two ladies are still there, with their families. They have families, so they make use of what is available to them.

It is difficult and it will be until we can find a way of communicating directly with people who are on the waiting lists. However, it is different in the city. Back in the early 2000s, in places such as Eyemouth and Inverness, people contacted the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society, or they contacted what was then the allotments regeneration initiative that I volunteered with. They would say that they were looking for an allotment and ask what to do, and we would explain the basic process. That amounted to finding other like-minded people and forming a cohesive group. I hope that it will come up later on in our discussions what the nature of such an organisation should be. Back then, it tended to be an unincorporated association but it would appear that, in Glasgow, there are things in the legislation or in the interpretation of the legislation that seem to require that a group has to be more than just an unincorporated association.

Willie Coffey: Karen, do you or Maria want to come in?

Maria de la Torre: Yes. I have a couple of thoughts I want to add. As a bit of background, I should probably say that our organisation—[*Inaudible*]—charity started six years ago and reformed as a company two years ago, so we have been dealing with members and allotment reports for a while. One of the things that is transmitted to us is the frustration that many people feel because they are not able to get hold of an allotment. For some, it is something that they are quite desperate for. They might not have a garden or any other space.

For an organisation that has been working on the issue for a while, it is quite disappointing to us that we are not able to give people a timeline for when they will be able to access a site. However, many people have a real desire to get hold of land. Some people might decide to do other activities or get involved in other things; however, from the feedback that we get, some people really feel that gap.

The other point that I was going to raise, which is slightly different, is that one of our experiences is that a lot of organisations have approached us for sites and to rent plots—it is not just individuals who have approached us. Organisations such as those that work with children or deal with homelessness have got in touch with us because they want plots that they can use for their clients and volunteers. We had not realised that there would be strong demand from those organisations, which is a new phenomenon. Since Covid in particular, those organisations feel that outdoor spaces are safer. Food growing provides opportunities for people to develop skills that help them to cope better with life and helps with mental health and other issues, and perhaps it even helps people to develop their self-confidence. Food growing is also quite important because it helps families who do not have as much to get access to food.

There is a real gap there that is felt by many.

Karen Birch: I agree with Maria de la Torre and echo what she said, as I think that she has covered most of what I was going to say.

It goes back to what Ian Welsh said about people being on the waiting list—we need to look a little more closely at why people are on the waiting list and what they think they want to do with an allotment. Ian's experience was that when he was shown the site, it was exactly what he was expecting and he knew exactly what to do with it. I think that some people who have come through the community garden experience and have been on the waiting list have not actually wanted an allotment as such; they have wanted an opportunity to grow their own food, to be involved in something that they view to be climate friendly, or to be in an outdoor space, as Maria has said.

We could maybe do a little more work to unpick what people think: because the allotment model is so well developed and the word "allotment" is so well known—you see programmes on the television that talk about allotments and allotment spaces—that might mean that people think that an allotment is their only option. If they are looking for somewhere to get out of their flat, then they think, "Well, I need an allotment".

However, as Maria was saying, it might be that they just need some outdoor space, to be able to meet other people in a safe way post-Covid. There may well be some work that needs to be done to see whether people actually want an allotment, which might feed into why there are so many plots that become neglected. What people thought that they wanted was not actually what they wanted. There may be something around that.

Willie Coffey: I think that Rosanne Woods has talked about the 250 m² requirement. Does there need to be flexibility around that? Do local authorities have to allocate 250 m², or could we be more flexible? Could we give people some kind of entry-level plot that is perhaps easier to manage, and might enable us to allocate smaller allotment

sizes and spaces to people in order to get those waiting lists down? Should we be more flexible about the requirement for 250 m² that is in the legislation?

Rosanne Woods: None of our allotment holders thinks that their plot is too small. I am in a family of only two, but everybody has excess stuff, which all gets given away to the local food co-operative. Everybody has more than enough. There are families of four and more, and they grow enough for themselves. Therefore, I think that the size of our allotments is good. If we had not had the size that we have, there would have been only 13 individual plots and three community ones, which is nothing. Now, we have a decent number of plots. I think that the half-plots are a good way to go. Musselburgh Allotments Association has started using half-plots to get its waiting list down. There should be some flexibility there.

Willie Coffey: Thank you. What do you think, Ian?

Ian Welsh: With the size that was put in the legislation, it was a long and hard fight. As we have tried to make clear, it is there as a reference size, not a compulsory one. When I was involved in the allotment regeneration initiative, I went around sites and met people in places where they wanted to set up new sites. My experience was that most of the existing stock of 6,500 allotments were not exactly the same size, and that is still the case. They are whatever size best fitted the piece of ground that was available to accommodate the number of people who wanted to have a plot.

We certainly do not want existing sites to be redesigned to make them all 250m². That figure is simply a yardstick for the size of allotment that would be needed if the aim is to produce enough fruit and vegetables to make a meaningful impact on sustaining a household. Our concern was that, if the provision was watered down too much, such that allotments could be the size of the space in the middle of the desks that committee members are sitting at, that is the size that all allotments would end up being, and we would not achieve the objective that we are meant to be achieving.

That said, there are a number of other issues tied up with the size. There is no doubt that there is value in people having access to a smaller space. That lets them start off and find out whether having an allotment is for them, and whether a space of 10m² or 20m² is all that they need for what they want to do.

However, spaces of that size are not allotments; they are not what is defined in the legislation, and they are not protected by the legislation. That is why, by 2007, there were only 6,500 plots left in Scotland, which is probably about 10 per cent of the number that there had been after the war. There was perceived to be no protection.

Willie Coffey: Thank you. Would Karen Birch and Maria de la Torre like to comment on the 250m² issue?

Karen Birch: I agree with Ian Welsh. There needs to be some sort of protection that says what an allotment is. There is a feeling that 250m² is the amount of space that is needed in order to fulfil the purpose of growing food for a family of four. There needs to be protection around that so that, as has been said, people who successfully manage that size of plot and who successfully grow food for their families on that size of plot can be protected.

However, we need to be more creative in finding other ways of enabling people to grow. Perhaps we need to find another name. When the council creates an allotment plot, it could also create smaller spaces that could be called something different. Within that, it should create a community space so that we can have a flow-through of people, because not everybody's motivation for having an allotment-sized plot is to grow food for a family of four.

Maria de la Torre: We have some designs. Our designs were based on the feedback that we received from the survey—[*Inaudible*.]—quite a range of sizes. Even a large plot that we have planned would be smaller than—[*Inaudible*.]—20m by 10m, 10m by 10m and 10m by 5m.

Although I recognise that there is a point about the protection of allotments as a—[*Inaudible*.]—for growing food, there is perhaps a need for flexibility to allow some of the plans to develop and to enable more people to access sites and to cater for a variety of circumstances. Many people just want to do a little bit and are beginning, and they do not want—[*Inaudible*.] It is important to recognise that everybody's circumstances might be different.

11:00

Willie Coffey: I am happy with those responses, convener, and happy to let colleagues come in.

The Convener: We will move on to questions on the local food growing strategies from Paul McLennan.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): Good morning, panel. As the convener said, I want to explore the local food growing strategies. One key point in our papers is that the Community Growing Forum Scotland has highlighted that part 9 of the 2015 act aims to go beyond simply addressing adequate allotment provision and that it

"also aims to include wider community food growing opportunities, especially in areas of socio-economic disadvantage".

You have all touched on the food growing strategies, but what involvement do your groups have with the local authority in relation to the strategies?

I will come to Rosanne Woods first, because her site is in my constituency, and I know that East Lothian Council has put together a local food growing network. On the point about trying to include those who are experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, as we know, there are areas of poverty in Tranent and Prestonpans that are in the 10 per cent most deprived areas in the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. What is your involvement in the local food growing strategy? What are your thoughts about including those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged?

Rosanne Woods: I have read the strategy. As I mentioned, we all help, and we have the food bank and Home-Start East Lothian. After the food bank joined our allotment site, there was a discussion about health and wellbeing in the Fa'side area, where I am, and about food poverty during the summer holidays. We are about to have only our second meeting, but lots of community groups are involved, such as the food bank, Home-Start and East Lothian Roots & Fruits, and we are coming up with a programme to deal with food poverty during the summer holidays.

Paul McLennan: I have met the groups concerned, and that is a great initiative. Will you say a bit more about your involvement with the council in relation to the food growing strategy? Has there been a lot of discussion, or could that process work a bit better?

Rosanne Woods: There has been no discussion. I have read the strategy, but I have had no discussion with the council, purely because we know that it does not have the manpower. I think that everybody who is involved in the area is happy to go with it, and we will let the council know what we have decided. The group is going to be called the Fa'side food fighters. We are not keeping the council out of it; we just realise that it has better things to do. We can do it, and we are actually doing it.

Paul McLennan: That is really helpful.

Karen, you touched a little on your involvement with Scottish Borders Council. Do you want to say any more on that in relation to the food growing strategy and areas of socioeconomic disadvantage? Have there been any discussions or involvement in that regard?

Karen Birch: When the council started to prepare the food growing strategy, we were quite critical, because it is a community food growing strategy rather than a local food growing strategy, so it does not really involve other local producers. That said, from the development of the community food growing network, the council has now facilitated a Borders food growers network, which is working well.

We have done education exchanges between groups—for example, Greener Peebles runs the community growing initiative over in Peebles. We visited its garden and it came to visit our garden so that we could share our experience. The food growers network is helping a lot of small organisations, including ours. It is helping us to build capacity as well.

Abundant Borders started out as, at heart, a food insecurity charity. We work on a circular basis: we teach people how to grow food in a sustainable way and then we teach people how to prepare healthy, inexpensive meals from the food that they can grow or source locally. We base that in a community garden and we are looking at that as a way of addressing some of the issues that you have outlined. The council has been really supportive and we are working with the council and housing associations in order to bring some smaller food growing initiatives into the heart of places such as Langlee.

Paul McLennan: Maria, would you like to comment on what I asked about?

Maria de la Torre: Highland Council just published its food growing strategy earlier this summer. That has been a very positive development, because it has been accompanied by a little bit of resource—there is a project officer. That is quite key in developing the area and even just that makes a huge difference to groups such as ours—the fact that, to its credit, the council recognises the work that we are doing, even though we do not yet have a site, has been very important for us. It is making a bit of an impact and these things can help pave the way to making things better.

Paul McLennan: Obviously, Highland is different from a lot of urban local authorities. Is there a rural poverty aspect to that, given the scale of the Highlands? Has that been discussed at all?

Maria de la Torre: The strategy just covers a number of principles and examples. The authority tackles a number of areas and it sees it more as an initiative that will facilitate activity rather than necessarily covering everything in depth. It is there as a reference to promote activity.

Poverty is an issue that is perhaps more hidden in our area and the way to tackle it is not just with strategies. We need to create spaces or initiatives that are close to those who need them.

Our own experience of being contacted by groups such as Action for Children is that they feel that having spaces that allow them to do activities close to where they are based—where they have the users—is important as a way of empowering some groups to be able to access food and feel that they have a choice about the food that they consume and grow. It is important to highlight that that is an issue that needs to be tackled by thinking about those opportunities in relation to where we place the sites.

Ian Welsh: On the issue of social deprivation, what became clear to us over the period from 2005 up to the time that we were negotiating over the introduction of the new legislation was that there was all sorts of self-generated allotment group activity across the country, exemplified by Eyemouth, Inverness and the Hawthorn site, but there was a noticeable lack of such activity in the belt around Glasgow. Glasgow itself is an exception, because it had an existing network of allotments. Although the waiting lists were growing, there were already a reasonable number of allotments in existence, whereas, in many of the surrounding council areas, in what you could describe as the post-industrial belt, there were either not so many allotments or none at all. There was not quite the same evidence of self-generated allotment groups. To some extent, that is because people have become conditioned to think that the council does it, so if the council is not doing it, it is not happening. It seems to me that that is the exact opposite of what community empowerment is about.

Recently, there has been evidence of a more positive approach in the likes of North Lanarkshire, where a number of new sites have been set up. The council might have been proactive in initiating the process. I used to attend Renfrewshire Council's growing grounds forum meetings, for which I still get minutes. The number of allotments has not really grown—the council has more or less the same number of allotment sites as it had at the beginning—but they all look better than they did in 2005-06.

Until a couple of years ago, I was involved with North Ayrshire food forum, which was set up to address food poverty issues. A mixture of people from various groups that were involved in running food banks, other types of initiatives and—[*Inaudible*.]

The Convener: I do not know whether you can hear me, Ian. We just lost the tail end of your audio—we cannot hear you.

There was a new bit for me in what you gave us—there might not be more allotments, but the way in which they are used has improved in that one place that you talked about.

Paul McLennan: That has been very helpful. Thank you.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Good morning convener and panel. It is great to see all the witnesses at the meeting this morning.

I will explore the topic of community organisations and volunteering. Over the past few weeks, the committee has heard about the importance of volunteering in successful community growing. How can local authorities help community growing and allotments to thrive in areas with lower levels of volunteering? I direct the question to Ian Welsh, who has touched on that point earlier but might like to add a bit more to it. I do not know whether his sound is back on.

The Convener: No.

We might start with Rosanne Woods—I feel that I have heard a lot from her about volunteering.

Rosanne Woods: The discussion makes me realise that we are really lucky in Tranent, and I had not fully appreciated that until now. We have something called the Volunteer Centre East Lothian—VCEL. People who want volunteers ask the centre, which will put something out for them.

For our community groups, we also have the criminal justice team. If we—not just community groups, but also the Tranent Allotment Association—need any work done, the team will do it for us. Obviously, the school has many volunteers who will help, as do New Beginnings and Home-Start. Even individual plot holders will help the other areas if they want—even if it is just to clean out an overgrown plot.

We have good access to volunteers. Because of the number of volunteers we already have in allotments, we probably do not use many new ones, as we do not need them. We really are quite lucky.

Marie McNair: Yes, I picked that up.

Could East Lothian Council do anything more, or be better at anything that would assist your group?

Rosanne Woods: No. We are quite lucky. The person I deal with the most in the groups that I am involved with gives us the support that we need—if I need to ask for anything, he is there. He just lets us run, because we know what to do. He could not do more to help us. The council is there if we need it.

Marie McNair: I will pop that question out to the rest of the panel. Would Karen Birch and Maria de la Torre like to add anything further?

Karen Birch: For us, it goes back to what Maria de la Torre said about having the ability to do

community growing and the ability to volunteer close to people, where they need it. That is why we have taken the approach of having small community growing spaces. Those can be very small pieces that are right outside. We work closely with Berwickshire Housing Association, which now routinely leaves a small piece of land that is available for community growing.

11:15

Therefore, even though we are terming people who come in to use the garden volunteers, as they are digging the beds and growing the vegetables and all that kind of thing, we think of them more as community food growers. They are not volunteering in the traditional sense by coming in and helping Abundant Borders to do something. We have the same links with the criminal justice team for when we want paths laid and big infrastructure projects done, but the volunteers are the people who come and grow food for themselves and their families, so we look at that in a slightly different way. The key is that there is that community engagement and involvement, because there are community growing spaces right at the heart of their community.

Maria de la Torre: I will touch on a different point. It is not so much about the role as it is about the need for land or spaces where we can take forward that community activity. One of the issues is that Inverness is a fast-growing city, with bricks and mortar everywhere, but it is not always recognised that you need community spaces for people to be able to develop a sense of community. It is important that that is at the heart of how you plan your communities and that you allocate spaces to be used for food growing, and maybe green space as well, as a key element of any area that is planned. That facility allows people to bring the community together.

Once you have those spaces, people naturally volunteer. It is not difficult to see that happening. We see it in other parts of Inverness, such as Crown, where there is a real desire to develop more community activities and for there to be more space. It is important to recognise that it is also an issue of land availability and making land available for community food growing and green spaces.

Marie McNair: You have certainly prepared for my second question. I will put a fuller question to you. Should community gardens have the same legislation as allotments currently do?

Maria de la Torre: It is interesting. As a result of the community consultation that we did, our project does not just cover allotments but aims to develop communal areas for food growing, a wider and more commercial community growing area, areas for recreation and an orchard. There is an increasingly wider perspective on how we see such spaces and a view that they need to be more than just allotments. That is important in bringing the legislation up to date with how we use the spaces and with what society's needs are.

There is certainly a wide division. There are a lot of interesting projects out there that show what it is possible to do. Certainly, a more communal model is being taken forward in various places. That is something that I support.

Marie McNair: Karen Birch, what is your view on my question about community gardens? Should they have the same protection in legislation as allotments?

Karen Birch: I think that it is more about providing green spaces and community spaces. Our view is that the community should be able to decide for itself how it wants to use that space. We encourage community food growing in the spaces in communities that we support, but it is also important that there are spaces where people can just meet and that the community can develop that.

I am not sure how you would protect that in legislation, but in Scottish Borders Council there has been a focus on being able to make more green spaces available. The council looks very carefully at how it uses space and how it can release more space.

We have good links with all three of the major housing associations in the Scottish Borders. They manage a lot of space and it can be an issue for them if a communal space is neglected. The approach is more of a partnership than one that is based on legislation. Because the size and use of each space is so different, I am not sure how protecting them would be put into legislation.

The Convener: I think that Ian Welsh also wants to answer that question. Ian, I hope that we can hear you.

Ian Welsh: I lost the sound and picture for a while, so I did not hear all of the question. Can you hear me?

The Convener: Yes.

Ian Welsh: Okay—I missed the question because I was cut off.

Marie McNair: I asked whether community gardens should have the same legislative protection as allotments.

Ian Welsh: There are a number of organisations around. I was involved with the allotment regeneration initiative, which I referred to. That project was managed through the then Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens, which is now called Social Farms and Gardens. It is a

representative body for people who are involved in that type of activity, and it has some allotment sites joined to it.

The Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society could become Scottish allotments and growing spaces. Unfortunately, for the reasons that I gave, an allotment is defined in law and a growing space is not. I will refer back to explain why we have views about that and its history. Ninety per cent of allotments have disappeared. I have a memory of going up Crow Road in Glasgow on a gadget that my dad fitted to the front of his bike, to the allotment that my mother looked after during the war, on what is now part of the Anniesland campus of Glasgow Clyde College. Many people's experience of and involvement in allotments comes from their early life, and there is a break in that experience because there are fewer allotments around so fewer people have them as part of their life experience.

It would have to be down to those involved in community gardens to take up the issue of legislation and have the gardens defined in law, if that is what they want. Bodies such as Social Farms and Gardens could provide the impetus, because they have a lot of experience in campaigning and funding.

The Convener: I have another couple of questions to ask. The first is about the relationship with planning. It might not be relevant to all witnesses, but some of you might have experience in this area. I am curious to hear about how communities can use local place plans to ensure that local authorities include community growing in local authority development plans, and to hear your general views on how the planning system could be better used to ensure that adequate provision is made for new and existing community growers. There are quite a few elements to that question, but it is generally about local place plans.

Ian Welsh: In 2019, the last time that we had an annual conference, we presented the booklet "Plan to Grow", which was drawn up for us by Steven Tolson, who is a planner. It was arrived at by holding a series of seminars with the assistance of Planning Aid for Scotland to come up with a series of proposals and guidelines to do with the provision of allotments and community growing spaces. There is also a larger report and both of those should be on the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society website.

One of the things that I asked Steven Tolson was whether he thought that it was worthwhile having follow-up sessions for the planners—because it was directed at them—and he reckoned yes. I do not know whether anything has taken place. It is another one of those things that takes a bit of funding input to get it on the way.

My own experience in relation to planning comes from 2005 to 2008—to go back there again—when all those new groups were coming in. The biggest pressure against any bits of ground anywhere that were identified as potential to be developed was their being sat on because of their potential for private house development, until the financial recession of 2008 kind of brought that to an end.

Unfortunately, another and perhaps more important need has an input into planning, which is the need for social and affordable housing. We must try to avoid a repeat of what happened after the war, when lots of allotments that I know of—certainly in Glasgow—disappeared in order to provide better housing for people. There was a clear need for that and I benefited from it myself. However, we also made lots of mistakes in creating all those big housing areas with little other type of provision as part of them. Some of them—again, certainly in Glasgow—have ended up being knocked down. I do not know what they have been replaced with, but I hope that, when they are replaced, planning will ensure the incorporation of spaces for people to grow.

The Convener: There is certainly an interesting invitation and challenge to planners around how we provide housing with gardens and growing spaces.

Maria de la Torre: It is perhaps about the importance that is given to those spaces in the planning decision making process. Normally, when we think about an allotment site, we think about the land that nobody else wants and that is far away, rather than thinking about where people will be able to walk to without having to use the car and where we will be able to provide what they need. Being able to approach that in the right way needs a bit of a mind change.

I will give the committee the example of a field that we are looking to acquire, which is within walking distance of six schools and a 20-minute walk from some of the more deprived areas. It is a site that could be at the heart of the town and easily accessible for many people. It is an obvious place and it is good agricultural land.

It is about thinking about the ideal place and location for those spaces, rather than them being an afterthought and simply turning the bit of land that nobody else wants into allotments. It is important to plan those sites so that they fulfil their whole purpose. We are not yet quite at the stage where that is fully recognised in the planning decision making process. Although there is an intention, which we see as local development plans develop a sense of place and of communities living close to each other, when it comes to reality it is still a challenge to get decisions made in the right way. There is not yet a

culture in the planning system of allowing those decisions to be made in the right way.

Karen Birch: I think that there is movement in the right direction down in the Borders. As I said, there is the green spaces team, and a mapping exercise is under way. We recently had a couple of incidents in which a housing association thought that it owned a piece of land within a housing development, and it turned out that the land was still owned by Scottish Borders Council. Working out who actually owns the land is not always clear.

11:30

The procedure for undertaking a community asset transfer, once the owner has been identified, needs to be simplified. We are supporting a group that has just created an allotment and community garden blended space. It took many years to get that asset transferred from Transport Scotland, seemingly because there was a mismatch between what was in the 2015 act with regard to ensuring that the land could be transferred to the community at a reasonable price and a separate requirement for Transport Scotland to get maximum value from that piece of land. The process needs to be simplified to make it easier for communities to be able to purchase land, and to enable land to come back into community use quickly.

Again, the approach in the Borders is working quite well because of the enhanced partnership working, and the benefits are now being seen. For example, the community garden that we support in Duns is on a piece of land on which, previously, all the building contractors parked and all the equipment was housed while the housing development was being built. It was not prime food-growing land—it was land that was left once the housing had been built. The last things off it were the Portakabins. It is a case of needing to be creative about the space that might be there once a development has been completed, as well as putting things in the plan in the first place.

The Convener: I thank you both for those contributions; they were really helpful.

I want to pick up on funding. I am interested to hear whether community growing projects and allotments associations have access to grants and other forms of funding. We want to know who the big funders are—perhaps so that we can apply for funding ourselves—and what role the Scottish Government has in that funding. That question is for Karen Birch first, after which I will see who else wants to pick it up.

Karen Birch: Most of our activities are funded through the Robertson Trust and the National Lottery Community Fund. Across all the various things that we do, my big issue is that, in applying for funding, in particular from the Scottish Government, a driver is always that there be a new project. If a community food-growing project is successfully delivering food to the local community and addressing issues such as social isolation and food insecurity, and is doing really well, it is difficult for it to attract funding for anything other than a new project. The constant drive to come up with new things creates a real administrative burden for small organisations such as ours.

We need acknowledgment that community food growing, however it is done, is vital. All of us on the panel do it in slightly different ways, but we are successful at it in our communities. Teaching about it and allowing people to grow food are important, and will be increasingly so given the cost of living crisis, climate change and so on. With all those drivers, it is important that community food growing be acknowledged as something that is worthy of core support, rather than there being a constant drive for something new. We are asked, “You did that last year, so what new thing are you going to do this year?” A different approach, and an acknowledgement that what we are all doing is vital, would be helpful, rather than our being in a situation in which we must constantly look for project funding.

The Convener: Before I bring in Maria de la Torre, Karen, I note that you mentioned large infrastructure projects. Do you get funding for those projects from the Robertson Trust and the National Lottery Community Fund?

Karen Birch: The funding that we get from the National Lottery Community Fund comes through its social isolation strand, and it reflects the importance not of growing food, as such, but of getting people into a community setting, part of which involves growing food.

The Robertson Trust funding, contrary to what I have just described, is an acknowledgement that what we have been doing for the past three years has been successful and valuable. As a result, the trust has given us core funding for another three years.

However, that is not typical; we have to apply for small grants all the time. For example, a community pavilion and outdoor classroom that we are putting up in Duns has been separately funded by Scottish Borders Council, and a polytunnel that we are looking to put up in Eyemouth has been funded from another funding stream. We are constantly looking for small amounts of money to fund small things, rather than receiving the overall funding that would allow our project to deliver across the whole region.

The Convener: Putting all those pieces together is quite time consuming. Maria wanted to respond to the question.

Maria de la Torre: I want to highlight a slightly different aspect. Because we are putting in an asset transfer request and therefore have to follow the 2015 act, our experience is different. Although we have not quite reached the implementation stage, I will highlight and commend the role of the Scottish land fund in supporting asset transfers. As a result of it, we were able to get the stage 1 funding that allowed us to carry out a feasibility study and develop the design. The funding has been really helpful in allowing us to step up our work and develop the group.

We are trying to access funds to purchase the site in question; I also want to commend Highlands and Islands Enterprise for running the land fund in a way that is very supportive of community groups. It provides a good model for facilitating and helping communities through the process. As I have said, we are not quite at the stage of the project itself being on the ground, but it is still worth highlighting that aspect for the committee's benefit.

The Convener: In a way, your group is what Ian Welsh was referring to when he talked about groups of people coming together to do the community empowerment work. I can see that, even so, you have still had to jump over a lot of hurdles in the years that you have been working on the issue.

Rosanne—do you want to say anything about the funding for your project?

Rosanne Woods: We rent from the council and are allowed to set our own rent, which we do. We have received some funding from the area partnership and, I think, from the Scottish Government, but we have also recently received money from the Scottish mental health fund, which will allow us to buy things such as tools. We have been quite lucky with our funding, because it has kept us going, but what helps us is the fact that we set our own rent, which we have agreed will increase each year by £2.

The Convener: That is great. We have come to the end of our questions, but I think that Ian Welsh also wants to comment.

Ian Welsh: I will comment briefly, convener. The site that I am on is independent; when the land came under threat from a housing development before the war, members were spurred to acquire it, which they did successfully in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

We sustain ourselves. In the way that Rosanne Woods described, we set our own rents at our annual general meeting, and we augment that money with an annual open day, the proceeds of which go into our general funds. Those funds allow us to pay the fees to do the things that we need to do. After all, we have electricity and water to pay and—[*Inaudible*.]—over the years.

If you can set up self-managing allotment sites within local councils or within the other arrangements that are around, the only real funding that you will need will come at the beginning to allow you to put in the infrastructure. There are 10,000 or so existing plots and it seems—certainly in the main cities—that another 10,000 people are looking for an allotment or something of that nature. That demand will require new and, I hope, suitable land. As a retired gardener—I put it no more sophisticatedly than that—I have been interested in hearing the descriptions of what some people get offered, and I am puzzled as to why people seem to think raised beds on crushed rubble are the best things in which to grow food. To get the best results, you want soil of reasonable quality—soil is the main asset that needs to be looked after.

The Convener: You are absolutely right, Ian. Good soil is a very good beginning, as I know from having started a project on sand in the not-too-distant past.

You said that you set a self-sustaining rent, but you have on-going costs from one year to the next. One issue that has been raised with us relates to Scottish Water. I would love to hear a little bit about how you pay for your water.

Ian Welsh: I gave up the post of treasurer back in, I think, 2012, so I am not absolutely up to speed on that. However, we are having our annual general meeting in a fortnight, and we will no doubt get a statement of what we are paying then.

Our water supply is metered, which means that we pay the bills as they come in via the association accounts. All that has happened this year will come out in a fortnight's time. Obviously, because of Covid, we have not been able to have our open day, so our only revenue has come from rents, and we have not been able to have an AGM in order at which we could reset the rents, if that had been deemed necessary.

We get a financial statement, which show what our outgoings are, and we pay honorariums to our main office bearers—the secretary, treasurer and the person who looks after the general grounds outwith the actual plots. All that has to be taken into account. Our main utility bills are for electricity and water. I am not aware of any specific significant price rise in the offing, but it is just one of the issues, along with the question whether we will have an open day, that we will need to look at when we set our rents.

I also point out that the value of the open day, beyond bringing in revenue, is that it provides another way for us to link with the local community. That sort of thing is always important. An allotment site should not be an island, exclusive to its members and no one else; instead, it should relate to the local community in which it sits.

The Convener: Your comment about the open day and allotments not being islands and needing to connect with the local and surrounding community is a nice place at which to end this evidence session. It takes us back to Maria de la Torre's point about having sites that are accessible to schools and which people can walk to easily in order to act on their impulse to get growing.

I thank our witnesses for joining us for what has been a really useful discussion, which has added another layer to the conversation that we have been having over the past few weeks. As that was the last public item on our agenda, I close this part of the meeting.

11:43

Meeting continued in private until 12:23.

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