OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 31 May 2022

Session 6

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Tuesday 31 May 2022

CONTENTS

	Col.
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	1
ALLOTMENTS	2

LOCAL GOVERNMENT, HOUSING AND PLANNING COMMITTEE
17th 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:

Richard Crawford (Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society)
Lou Evans (Community Growing Forum Scotland)
Stuart McKenzie (Federation of Edinburgh and District Allotments and Gardens Associations)
Jenny Reeves (Glasgow Allotments Forum)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Euan Donald

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 31 May 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 17th meeting in 2022 of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. 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 today is to decide whether to take items 3 and 4 in private. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Allotments

The Convener: The next item is to take evidence on the impact of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 on allotments and community food growing. This is the first of three evidence sessions that the committee is holding as part of its inquiry. We will be discussing the topic today with a panel of witnesses representing allotment and food growing organisations.

I welcome Lou Evans from the Community Growing Forum Scotland; Jenny Reeves, who is the chair of the Glasgow Allotments Forum; Stuart McKenzie, who is the president of the Federation of Edinburgh and District Allotments and Gardens Associations; and Richard Crawford, who is the vice-president of the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society, who is joining us online.

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. If other witnesses wish to comment, please indicate your desire to do so to me or to the clerk and I will bring you in at an appropriate point. Richard, I would be grateful if you could indicate when you wish to come in by typing R in the chat function in BlueJeans. I will begin by asking a few questions and then open up the session to questions from other members.

This is about the big picture of allotments. I am keen to hear your views on the broader, positive impacts of allotments, particularly the social, environmental and food security benefits that allotments bring. Do you have any sense of how those benefits are being measured. Do you think that allotments have an impact in other areas of public policy in Scotland? There is quite a bit there. I will start with Stuart McKenzie and then go to everybody else.

Stuart McKenzie (Federation of Edinburgh and District Allotments and Gardens Associations): I am very impressed with my allotment. I could not have done without it during Covid and I think that everybody on the allotment site would agree with me. It was an important place to get sanctuary, aside from the food growing aspect. From a health point of view, physical plus mental health is important and it is delivered quite nicely by having an allotment. Could you repeat the next bit, please?

The Convener: Do you have a sense of how that is being measured in any way?

Stuart McKenzie: I do not think that it is being measured. I was quite pleased to read a report from the Brighton and Hove Allotment Federation that put pound notes against an allotment; the value in providing an allotment came to £166

every year. That was in things such as carbon capture, health benefits and the packaging that you do not need to put around a cabbage before you eat it, which means that less money is spent on waste disposal. A value has now been associated with providing an allotment.

I grow quite a lot of food, but I know that I get it cheaper in the supermarkets, even now. I grow the stuff that I want to eat—stuff that is tasty and is not processed by supermarkets. I grow tomatoes that have skins that you do not have to throw at the wall. It is just better food, and I think that more and more people are realising that, especially as we come out of Covid, which is why waiting lists are soaring.

I looked out the information that we talked about yesterday. It is called "Peter's Plot". For six years, a guy called Peter recorded exactly what he grew and he weighed everything. When the City of Edinburgh Council wanted to triple our rents, we used the information to prove that we were not getting that much value out of our allotments and that, therefore, a rent increase of that magnitude was probably illegal. I will pass it to you later. It basically says that we grow a total value of about £500 every year, potentially. Peter was a very good gardener and he produced a heck of a lot of stuff. A lot of people of course use their plots more for sitting and enjoying listening to the birds, but that is the potential.

The Convener: Of course, sitting and listening to the birds has value in the benefits that it brings to mental health and wellbeing .

Stuart McKenzie: Exactly, yes.

Lou Evans (Community Growing Forum Scotland): I am lucky to have an allotment and I echo everything that Stuart McKenzie said. I think that the only different piece when we talk about allotments is that I have young children. They no longer want to come to the allotment with me, which is perfectly normal, but when they were very young, they came to the allotment. It was a safe place for them to play and they know where food comes from.

I would argue that for anyone who does not have access to an allotment or for whom an allotment is just too much to take on, the potential when we talk about the wider scope beyond just growing your own in an allotment setting is that we need to address our food issues and our disconnect from food. Although we advocate for quite different models, I think that we would all argue that we need a huge amount more of this and it needs to be highly visible. I am prepared to be disagreed with about this, but my allotment is tucked away; it is a place of sanctuary and wildlife, it has gates that make it secure and it was fantastic during Covid and great for family time, but I would argue that it is not a highly visible alternative model to our food system.

We need a whole load of different models. We need to put where food comes from back in people's faces. It is not evident enough. Although allotments are one form of being able to do that and are a brilliant model, they are not the only model. We need a whole load of diverse models and they need to be highly visible in a way that many allotment sites simply are not.

Jenny Reeves (Glasgow Allotments Forum): I want to pick up on what Lou Evans said. What we have not talked about are the social benefits. I am from Springburn allotments, which is a private site but, nevertheless, I think that some of the evidence there is interesting. We were very run down and in an awful state and we have been reinvigorating the place, so we have had quite a lot of plots to offer and our demographic now is preponderantly new Scots. I think that the reason why that is happening in Springburn, which is an area of high multiple deprivation, is that the new Scots are coming from food cultures that are connected with growing.

Springburn is fun because you can see so many different ways of growing things and also because it is a place where groups meet. We are now beginning to get representatives on our committee who reflect the diversity of that population.

However, it is sad that Springburn used to have four large allotment sites and—I will use this word although I am sure that it is probably not correct—native Scots, the white working-class Scots in Springburn, are not applying for plots. Picking up on what Lou Evans said, I think that that is because they have lost their connection with what was a Scottish tradition of food growing and so on.

Also to pick up from Lou Evans about allotments being hidden away behind fences, I think that you need to take into account the fact that allotments now do not have to be separate from community groups. Our allotment site, for instance, has the North Glasgow Community Food Initiative on it, so you can have a group that runs a group community plot in an allotment site.

Glasgow Allotments Forum has been working with Public Health Scotland to look at the place standard. Something interesting that emerged from doing that as a group was when we took people round a park to look at it and think about growing in the park. We had people who were interested in market gardens, urban farms, community gardens and allotments. In the end session, when we got them all together and we asked them to evaluate the experience of using the place standard, they all began to say, "It has alerted us to that as a public space, and we do not grow in public." We should be growing in public.

We should have public places where people can come and see it happening, talk to people who are growing and see different models.

I will shut up, because I will probably go on about land use. I think that, if the Scottish Government is pursuing the ends of the good food nation, it needs to bear in mind that it is not enough to just teach schoolkids or people in further education. We need to get the whole adult population involved in this and growing things needs to become a public activity and a valued activity that everybody can get into. We will work on our end to say to our allotment associations, "Please think about how you can connect more with your local community," but they are traditionally in funny little bits of land that nobody knows about and are surrounded by a high fence. That will not do for the future.

The Convener: Indeed. Thank you very much for your response to that. Yesterday, we visited Stuart McKenzie's allotment and I told him that I came across that allotment site in Inverleith park when I was a child, and I remember it being a magical discovery experience. You are right that allotments are tucked away. We visited others yesterday as well. Inverleith allotments seem to be more visible now and there are 180 people growing food there. We visited others that are visible and we saw a community plot that involves new Scots, which you spoke of. It was incredible to see that coming to life.

I will bring in Richard Crawford to answer the same question. In general, what are the social, environmental and food security benefits of allotments and community growing and do you have a sense, from the work that you have been doing, of whether the benefits are being measured or assessed in any way?

Richard Crawford (Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society): Most of the points have been covered by the others. Education is big for us at the moment and my local allotment site has engaged with the school that is near us, along with a nursery. The nursery has a plot on our allotment and is working hard to grow food there.

The work that we are doing with the school has reawakened something in me. I used to garden with my grandfather when I was about two—I have pictures of me pushing wheelbarrows around—and for me that was quite an exciting time, watching things grow. The engagement that we have with the school now is showing that to me all over again; the schoolkids are excited and involved. The issue that we might have in years to come is that, if even a reasonable proportion of those kids decide that growing food is for them, we will need even more allotments. That is a knock-on effect that we need to consider.

Apart from that, I agree with everything that the others said.

Lou Evans: Can I come back in?

The Convener: Let us move on, because we have quite a lot to get through. I am sure that we will be asking a question where you can bring in all those bits and pieces. I want to get to what we are here to talk about today, which is part 9 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. A key aim of part 9 is to help address the demand for allotments, which Richard Crawford touched on. I am interested to hear whether you think that that legislation has made a difference in addressing the demand. That is for whoever wants to pick it up.

10:15

Stuart McKenzie: No, is the answer. I do not think it has made any difference at all, unfortunately. I was in the Scottish Parliament when the bill was passed, and it was a wonderful time. I really thought that, at last, someone or some organisation had decided that allotments were worth having after all.

What has happened in Edinburgh is that our waiting list has rocketed. It shot up before Covid and I think that Covid tended to double it. To give you some numbers—I will not give you the full picture, as I did so yesterday—we have about 5,500 people on the waiting list. We have a stock in Edinburgh of 1,700 plots and we are supposed to have a waiting list no longer than half the number of available plots. By my calculations, we are 3,111 plots short of being compliant with the 2015 act. To satisfy that demand with a half-plot for everybody on the waiting list, we would need 77 acres of land. To give you an idea of what that means, the whole of Inverleith park is 54 acres. To satisfy the entire waiting list, we would need 130 acres, so that is basically about two and half times the area of Inverleith park.

The waiting times in Edinburgh are at about the 10 to 14-year mark at the moment; that is, people arriving on allotment sites have waited 14 years. I recently met a guy who arrived on my site and I said, "You do not look old enough. You don't have grey hair like the rest of us," and he said, "I put my name down when I was 12". That is what you need to do these days. Since that 14-year time lapse, allotments have got even more popular. I do not think that it is 14 years really. I prefer to do it the other way about and say that we expect the turnover in Edinburgh to be about 90 plots this year. At the moment, with a waiting list of 5,500, one divided by the other gives you a waiting time of about 61 years. Clearly, there is a big gap between demand and supply of allotments.

The Convener: Thank you for that clear response and those useful figures.

Jenny Reeves: We have similar figures. In Glasgow, allotments are not quite as popular as they are in Edinburgh, but the most recent figure, which was given to me a week ago, was that there are 1,900-odd on waiting lists, and not all the local associations had returned their waiting list figures. In addition, we have 12 private sites and, when people apply for an allotment, I do not think that they particularly distinguish between a Glasgow City Council site and a private site, so we have additional demand there. I therefore think that we are looking at a figure of about 2,000. I think that the site with the longest waiting list has 400 people on it. Turnover for most of the sites that I have looked at is in the range of three to five plots a year, so you can work out that it will take quite a long time to get a plot.

I am on a group that was set up under the food growing strategy, which is supposed to involve participants working with the local authority. We have never had a central waiting list. There has always been one in Edinburgh, but we have never had that. Each association keeps their waiting list and, at the moment, Glasgow City Council officers are asking the associations to provide their waiting list details.

The trouble with using waiting lists as a measure of demand is related to the problem that I mentioned at Springburn: in large tracts of Glasgow, particularly in the socially deprived areas, people have lost their connection with growing. They have high-rise flats and are deprived in that there are not as many parks in those areas. Therefore, to say that nobody is asking for a plot from a certain ward is a bit of a mistake, because those people do not know that it is a possibility or how to set about it.

There is very little information on the GCC website. It literally just gives contacts of the associations and tells people to apply—that is about it. It has the food growing strategy, but there is no information about the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and the permissions in it. We have no central waiting list as yet, which we are supposed to have.

I have other points that I would like to cover about getting land, but I will do that later.

The Convener: We have lots of questions.

Jenny Reeves: Yes. On that one, I just want to say that the waiting list is an indication of demand, but it is not fully satisfactory in my opinion.

The Convener: It is a very good point that not everybody is aware of the possibility or the access that they could have. Work needs to be done on that.

Richard Crawford has indicated that he wants to come in on the same question.

Richard Crawford: The direct answer to your question is no. Most of the councils that we have interacted with do not have a food growing strategy, although some do. The ones that have a strategy seem to indicate that they will assist allotment plots to be developed without doing it themselves. In fact, quite a number of people contact us to say that they are looking to go on to a waiting list somewhere and the council has referred them to us, which is not how the process is supposed to work. I would say emphatically that, at the moment, there is very slow take-up in adhering to part 9 of the 2015 act.

Lou Evans: You asked whether the legislation has made a difference, and you have had quite a clear answer. However, I am still quite hopeful that it can make a difference. I have worked across other parts of the United Kingdom, and I know that Scotland had an enviable policy environment for community growing and allotment provision. We need to think about what has changed in the 10 years for which we have all been working hard and what more is required.

With support from the Scottish Community Alliance, the Community Growing Forum has done a very light review of the status of the food growing strategies to look at how many councils have published a strategy, what they say, how many allotment waiting lists are embedded in food growing strategies and how many food growing strategies have action plans.

You may or may not be aware that, in the build-up to the introduction of the legislation, there was a huge amount of civil servant involvement and lots of voluntary contributions from various organisations, largely represented through the Community Growing Forum. There was quite a lot of energy, and local authority officers, through the central person in Government, were supported to share best practice and to talk about what was working and what the issues were and that kind of thing.

Sadly, that resource has fallen away within the good food nation team. The forum tries to pick up that work and, because we have worked collaboratively with local authorities for many years, tries to support local authorities to do that, but it feels like another ask that has not been resourced or supported enough.

However, in the 18 food growing strategies that are published, some of the language of the people charged with writing these things is positive and hopeful. People are beginning to twig, albeit somewhat slowly, about the multipolicy cross-sectoral benefits of outdoors activity and of empowering and supporting people to manage

and develop a green space, either collectively or individually. In all the models that are represented here, we have enormous potential. We have the policy, but we really need to nail down what we are going to do about it.

The Convener: That is helpful. It is great to hear about the work that you have been doing with the Scottish Community Alliance to analyse the food growing strategies.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): My first question is for Richard Crawford. We have touched on waiting lists. Do you have any idea of how many people across Scotland are currently on a waiting list for an allotment?

Richard Crawford: That is a bit of a difficult one for us, because we can talk about our membership, but we do not have every allotment or growing area on our books. Some people like to belong to GAF or FEDAGA. Obviously, we have a good handle on the allotments that we have under our wing, and in that respect, the waiting list will be in excess of 50 per cent more than the allotment spaces in a given site. For example, in Inverness, where I am from—well, I am not actually from there—there are 68 plots and we have over 90 on our waiting list. That situation is reflected elsewhere. It is a very mixed picture, because some allotment sites do not have a waiting list. For some strange reason, they do not physically have a waiting list, so they cannot gauge how many people want an allotment. We are looking into those issues. However, in general, the figure will be more than 50 per cent higher than the number of allotments.

Mark Griffin: Can anyone else shed any light on that? Do we have an idea of general numbers of people waiting for an allotment? Could the Government or local government do more to co-ordinate a national or local authority level register to assist with waiting lists and gauging demand?

Stuart McKenzie: Yes, a lot could be done. At the moment, all the individual authorities are acting on their own behalf, and some of them will be more active than others. I maintain that to operate the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 as it was intended requires the creation of communities. In other words, the act has provision for the identification of a piece of land and the creation of a committee to oversee the creation of the allotment site. The problem is that people go on to a waiting list, particularly in Edinburgh, and they wait and wait and wait. Nothing active is being done with the people on the waiting list. There is no communication and no education takes place about growing vegetables or how to behave on an allotment site.

Most importantly, if there is a piece of land, we could get in touch with all the people who live nearby—we have their postcodes—and then empower them and get them building an allotment site. Grants are available. The money does not have to come from central Government money, as long as the process is nothing to do with a local authority. If you are a private concern, you can create your own allotment site. That is what the 2015 act says and, in fact, what Edinburgh's allotment strategy says. Edinburgh has said, "We don't have the money to do it, so any new allotment site will have to be created by the applicants." However, we are not communicating with the people on the waiting list.

Mark Griffin: Are any authorities doing that proactive engagement work with people on lists to identify sites and encourage them to work together?

Lou Evans: With a slightly different hat on, I am about to start working with one local authority to look at shortening its waiting list. If somebody wants to engage with a piece of land or have a go at growing their own and they are a new entrant and have never done that before, if they do not find a local green space and get involved with a local community project, because it is not visible or is not actively recruiting or whatever, their only other possibility, if they know about it, is to sign up to an allotment waiting list.

There is a possibility that lots of other people want to have a go at growing their own and want to engage with the local environment and be supported to do so. We still equate growing your own with allotment growing, yet there are many other models and forms of engagement that could build up to somebody taking on an allotment once they have the skills and know-how.

10:30

If we think more creatively about the approach to growing your own, there are opportunities to shorten allotment waiting lists. Some people say that they want an allotment, but do they really? Do they want a full-size allotment? Do they want a starter plot? Do they actually just want to go out and meet other people? Do they want to have a go at growing their own? Do they know how many hours are involved in that, and is it a realistic commitment? I know what I am doing. I am a working mother and I do not have time to get to my allotment, even though I am trained and know what to do.

There is an opportunity to work more proactively, collaboratively and creatively with local authorities and to have a go at shortening waiting times and loosening some of the blockages. That could involve sifting out or weeding, if you like, the people who really want to take on an allotment and the people who are

seeking another model of engagement to have a go at growing locally. People might be on an allotment waiting list for years before they finally get one—how many people have a 10-year wait?

We have an enormous surge of interest and a series of events colliding. There is an enormous opportunity to engage more people with our food system to learn about where good food comes from and to meet multiple targets. We need to think urgently. We have been saying this for a long time, and it now feels very much like now or never. Now is the opportunity. The spotlight is on our combined sector and we need to work collaboratively to take advantage of that. I am hopeful that things can be done.

Jenny Reeves: Lou Evans is right that this is an opportunity. For the reasons of climate change and all the rest of it, there is also an urgency for it to happen. Glasgow's food growing strategy is fine—there is really nothing to disagree with in it—and the same could be said about the other food growing strategies. However, the vision of people self-organising is quite difficult, particularly in an urban environment. We have a model that has come from island communities or rural communities that are quite small and where everybody knows everyone and they know the local land and the way that it is shaped. In urban environments, people do not know all that.

I live in a flat, and I could not define what my community is. It is difficult to define and it is difficult to get in touch with what goes on there. It is all very well to say that people will set up their own allotment associations, but there is a problem with putting them in touch with one another, because they are individuals on a waiting list.

I apologise to Richard Crawford, but I am going to talk about something from Highland. Highland's food growing policy has a flow chart for setting up a group and, when you have a group, a flow chart for getting the land. About a year and a half ago, we set up a webinar in Glasgow and tried to attract people who were on the waiting list to come to that. We talked about the powers in the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. A small group formed out of that who called themselves the People's Plot. Those people wanted allotments. As Stuart McKenzie said, the trouble with allotmenteers is that they think, "I'm all right, Jack." They are sitting on their plots and are perfectly happy. Why would they worry about the waiting list? It is just tough, and it is not their responsibility.

The People's Plot involves quite active professional-type people. They are now a year and a half on, and they have just about got themselves incorporated. Once they have done that, they have to find a piece of land, which they can get off the map on the website—although I find it very difficult to work with, but that is up to judgment. They then have to survey the local community as to whether the proposal would be acceptable and conduct a desktop study to find out what the services are. They then have to find out whether the land is contaminated in any way. I think that it would be moving fast if it takes them five years to get to actual plots and people being able to stick their spade in them.

That is the difficulty—it is an enormous barrier. In a way, because we have lost unions and co-operatives and all the self-help groups that used to exist in working-class districts, a lot of people now do not have any experience of self-governing and organising such things and doing this stuff. We are talking about volunteers.

I have not mentioned grant funding yet. This little group gets together, and one grant funding organisation wants them to show how they are moving things in the local community, and another wants them to show how they will spread diversity. Somebody has to sit and write funding bids that are angled at each of those things to try to get small pots of money. Honestly, I think that it is madness. As volunteers, if you do not have support and do not have people who write grant applications and all the rest of it for a living, and if you have jobs that do not pay so well so you are running all hours, that is an unreasonable demand and there is no resourcing.

Stuart McKenzie is right that local authorities are feeling cut to the bone. As Lou Evans pointed out, a lot of support will be needed if we are to go down that line. It is also a violation of the promise in the CEA, which says that, if an individual wants a plot and has been on a waiting list for five years, the local authority should offer them one. It does not say, "You should get together with a load of people, form a group, find the land and do all that." That needs unpicking in some way.

I do not know whether all local authorities take that self-help approach.

Lou Evans: Many of them do. Richard Crawford will concur and maybe add to this, but the models of accessing allotments are very different. Some local authorities manage all their allotment sites, some manage no allotment sites, some manage some allotment sites and other sites are managed by devolved volunteer-led management committees but on local authority land. On my allotment site, there is one man who is a retired civil servant and who is wound up and stressed. Who will take on managing these things? He has never been busier and it is not pleasant, because people are desperate for land and he has to turn round and say no.

We have an issue. I do not know whether Richard wants to add anything, but we need to think creatively about how we sort that issue.

Richard Crawford: You are absolutely right. As other people have said, it is not just about allotments; there are other growing opportunities that need to be considered.

To address the point of the number of people on waiting lists, I have just done a quick extrapolation, and I would not be surprised if the figure is in excess of 10,000 across Scotland, and that might be conservative. Forgive me for saying this, but that question should be put to the local authorities. Should they not be able to give you that information if they are adhering to the 2015 act?

Mark Griffin: We certainly intend to put that question to them, and we will reflect your comments back to local authorities when we come to them.

We have touched on the provision that says that local authorities should

"take reasonable steps to ensure"

that the number of people on waiting lists is

"no more than one half of the total number of allotments".

Do you know where that figure came from? Was it just plucked out of the air? Is that a reliable or reasonable figure to use?

Stuart McKenzie: I think that the figure reflects the fact that you would expect to be able to supply an allotment to someone within five years. I imagine that it was based on the turnover of an allotment stock over five years, meaning that someone on the list should be able to get an allotment in that time. That makes sense to me.

Mark Griffin: Thanks. My final question is about how waiting lists operate. We have spoken about the immense benefit of allotments to physical and mental health and their contribution to reducing household bills through food growing. Is it appropriate that a waiting list should operate on a timed basis, or should we be looking at an allotment allocation policy that is based on need rather than time?

Stuart McKenzie: It has never been thought about. It has been a waiting list ever since allotments happened, I think. What you suggest might be possible, but the trouble is that people with an allotment have deep roots and you cannot just move them off—I do not think so, anyway. It is a tricky one.

Jenny Reeves: I think that it depends on what the organisations are. A lot of the associations are formed on the basis of a mutual society in which everybody has a share, and, as long as they are members and are paying their rents, obeying the rules and doing what they should be doing, they are not allowed to be hurled off. You cannot say, "You've had your five years of the allotment; now it's somebody else's turn," in part because of their incorporation. Even if they are unincorporated organisations, they still operate, on the whole, like a co-operative—like a society—that someone is a member of when they take on their plot.

As Stuart McKenzie said, it is about time and tradition. Where we are, they were originally called Springburn workmen's allotment gardens, and they were set up as part of working class self-sufficiency. They were co-operatives—industrial and provident societies—that were set up for mutual benefit.

Lou Evans: I get your point. It is a really interesting and pertinent question, but I would hate to see allotments become places that could have stigma attached to them. I think that it is about the role of community growing spaces, which there should be more of because there is tons of potential for reciprocal relationships and shared food.

The committee has visited a couple of funded projects that are specifically in areas that are defined by economic disadvantage but that do food provision with dignity. They are talking about active citizenship and are really doing their bit. The work that they do has status rather than a label attached to asking for food. It is reciprocal and is about giving, receiving or redistributing in a way that is fairer, as well as saving food from going to landfill, running community meals and organising uniform swaps.

These are all creative approaches that we need to have on the table, and these methods are not about intervention—they are not social services. The food pantry networks and some of the community meals are funded projects, but they are entirely volunteer led by people who are active on the ground. Some of the projects you have visited or will visit are funded models. They operate on a bean, and they work cross-sectorally. They are social working, but they are doing it in the evenings and at weekends with no referral, no stigma and nobody attending with labels.

10:45

These are the unsung heroes, and there is tons of potential for more of these ways of working not just in communities of economic disadvantage, but Scotland-wide. We can have a whole load more of this. Yes, there are barriers and there is a huge amount of work to do, but we have known for a long time what the barriers are and what the potential is, and we have not supported and resourced that work enough.

If we could think more creatively about it, we would not be having to say that only people who need to grow their own food can have access to an allotment. Would people who are hungry really work on an allotment? That is a big question to ask, too. I think that your question is a really interesting one, but it is a tricky line to take.

Richard Crawford: The figure of 50 per cent is very much based on the fact that you have that turnover within five years. At the moment, we are way past that. I would add the caveat that the figure needs to be considered site by site, instead of saying that it is 50 per cent for the whole of Edinburgh, because people at one side of Edinburgh will not want to travel right the way through to the other side of Edinburgh to their allotment.

Should the list be based on time or need? I would say that it should be based on both. I think that we need to rework that paragraph a little bit, to make it more precise about what it actually means.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Good morning, everybody. I want to explore with you the difference between formal allotments and non-allotment growing spaces, which Lou Evans has mentioned several times. My own local authority, East Ayrshire Council, does not run any allotments because, in its judgment, the demand is met by other means—community growing spaces here, there and everywhere. Is there an opportunity, across Scotland, to get the numbers in the formal allotment waiting list process down by developing better, newer, more imaginative processes of community growing? I ask Lou Evans for her thoughts on that.

Lou Evans: We would advocate both. To be clear, when we talk about growing in communities, we mean a whole lot of different models. Most of them are largely unfunded and volunteer managed. We are talking about allotments and, quite often, you have community plots within allotments. Community growing spaces come in all shapes and sizes, and the committee is going to visit some of the more complex ones. We could also talk about community orchards and verge growing. There is a whole raft of models.

I would argue that there is certainly a space for allotments. They have the benefits for new entrants that we have talked about, including refuge and sanctuary. Sometimes, people need to work and make a reconnection by themselves before they go beyond that. Many people, if they are lucky enough to have a garden or access to green space, are able to find that reconnection within their green space.

As I have said, we can collaborate and think more creatively about how we shorten allotment waiting lists. Maybe we need to think about some kind of centralised way of doing that in which people click a button and say that they want to engage with their local environment but need support to do so, or that they want access to land.

We also need to ask whether everybody who wants an allotment or who wants to engage in food growing or their local environment immediately thinks that they can approach their local authority. Some local authorities would say that they, in themselves, are a barrier. As a result of the community empowerment legislation, some local authorities have personnel who are making things happen, and some of those personnel recognise that many communities might not want to engage with a local authority but would rather engage with an intermediary.

We need to think about the role of local authorities and the potential for them to use community learning and development workers, where they still have them. We also need to think about third sector interfaces. There is tons of potential, but our issue is that a lack of resource and collaboration—having the time and the means to do the work—has left our sector fragmented and disjointed.

One of the issues for our sector is that, because how people relate to their local environment is such a personal thing, and because people and groups need bespoke support to do that, we cannot make everything generic. If we boil everything down to a system, we take the magic out of some of the things that we simply cannot measure—the unintended consequences, the conversations, the friendships that are made on allotment sites and community growing sites while sitting under a tree. Those things are really hard to measure, so, if we start to think about resourcing what we can measure, we have kind of missed the point.

Therein lies the nub. I think that we have to have something for everyone. We know that it is cost effective. It needs intelligence and collaboration in thinking about how we do things, and it needs bespoke responses and drilling down into every local authority—I totally agree with that—but we need to be careful that we do not squeeze the magic out of it, because we will lose people.

Willie Coffey: Let me turn to Stuart McKenzie. I am curious to know what is happening here. You said that about 5,000 people might be waiting for an allotment. What is causing 5,000 people to be waiting for an allotment in Edinburgh when there is nobody waiting for a community growing space in East Ayrshire? What is happening that is different?

Stuart McKenzie: There might be. There is no waiting list for people who would just like to grow a

few herbs in a wee box somewhere, so they put themselves on the allotment waiting list. I think that there is definitely some work to do in refining the figure to find out what people want before you start building these spaces. The last time that there was a review, it found that a third of people wanted a full plot, a third wanted a half plot and a third wanted just a wee raised bed. If we can get people growing in raised beds to start with, to prove that they can garden and grow food—and that they enjoy it—before they go on to a half plot, maybe that is how to do it. Or maybe people could start with a community garden.

Willie Coffey: What proportion of the people in that list of 5,000 are participating through the other means that Lou Evans has been describing? Do you think that they are engaging in other activities?

Stuart McKenzie: No, I think that they want their own private space. That is the difference between an allotment and a community space. I would hate to grow in a community space. You would end up saying things like, "Where has my cabbage gone? I grew that and I wanted it." Allotments are different. Even if it is just a small allotment, people want their own space. They want to be able to put their deck chair next to it and look at what they have grown—it is as simple as that. There is something very basic about it.

Willie Coffey: Is the asset transfer process in the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 being deployed to break down the barriers to accessing pieces of land?

Jenny Reeves: In Glasgow, there is a sense of, "Let's just get going with it. Let's just make a start". Glasgow has so many parks that, if you took a fairly small percentage of the space in all those parks, you would probably, with a mix of community gardens and allotments, be able to smash the waiting list. There would be the advantage of using land that was already in the local authority's grasp and that it would know was not contaminated, because it had not been used. That could also be done where a local authority was having a hell of a time because it could not pay to have its parks kept as they used to be kept. During former crises like the world wars, allotments and community growing moved into the parks like a shot.

If we are taking the climate emergency seriously—and that is what was so interesting about the place simulation—we have to start thinking radically, as Lou Evans said, and get on with it and find a way of getting down to things. People might be interested in growing but might not want to get tangled up in all this participation. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 is great, but it is calling for the big society place before we have the kind of structures that we need to get that going.

In Glasgow, there is the area partnerships arrangement, and some budget has been allowed to go to area partnerships that are based on the wards. There might be structures around that that would work for community councils there, but some places have active community councils or development trusts and other places do not. It is very variable.

One of the difficulties is that, if you are going to have a participative democracy—which is partly what this is about—you have to change both the people who want to participate and want things and the people who have been running things previously. We have attended all the participatory opportunities in Glasgow, and I have to say that both sides are very bad at it. They really do not know how to do it. They know the words to use, like "co-working" and all the rest of it, but actually doing it—making it real and meaningful for people—will take quite a while.

Willie Coffey: Thanks for that. I think that Richard Crawford wanted to come.

Richard Crawford: The question was: what is the difference between an allotment and a growing space? Allotments are growing spaces, very much the same as anywhere else, except that an allotment is obviously your own personal growing space. The big difference is that, in theory, allotments are protected by law. There are only certain things that you can do with allotments to close them down, transfer them or whatever else, whereas there is no protection for communal growing spaces. They could easily get wiped out or moved on.

I am involved with the Highland Good Food Partnership up here, and there are a wide variety of growing opportunities. We have allotments, there is communal growing and there are individual places around the Highlands that are being utilised for individual growing. All of those things need to be taken into consideration.

Community asset transfer is a long and difficult process, and formal structures need to be created to take over land. A few people around our area have been looking into that. It is a bit of a complex process, and it takes a bit of time to get sorted out.

As far as Ayrshire is concerned, with hindsight I wish that I had kept all the emails that I have answered and then deleted, because I am pretty certain that one of the emails that I got was from somebody in Ayrshire who said that they were looking to go on a waiting list and the council had referred them to SAGS because it does not keep anything formal. That needs to be looked into. I do not think that it is as simple as you think it is.

The Convener: At this point, I am going to set out what we will do for the next half an hour or so. We have about seven or eight questions left, and we will try to cover three themes. You may have already covered some of them, because you are doing such brilliant work here. What you are sharing with us is great.

The next theme is the implementation of the 2015 act and the assumptions about the size of allotments. Then we will bring in a bit more of the local food strategies, which Lou Evans started to touch on. We then want to talk about, and get a greater understanding from you about, volunteering and planning, which we have also touched on.

We still have quite a lot to cover, but we have touched on a lot of those things already. I will bring in Marie McNair with a couple of questions about the size of the plots.

11:00

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Good morning, panel, and thanks for your time this morning. I want to explore the implementation of the act and the size assumptions with a general question. Do any of the panel have views on the guidance and any other support that the Scottish Government gave to local authorities when part 9 came into force in April 2018? Are you aware of the guidance? What else should be done to ensure compliance with the act? I just put that out to everybody.

Stuart McKenzie: Size. In fact, the decision to make it 250m^2 was made in the shipping container that you saw during the site visit. Marco Biagi turned up in February in a very light suit and leather-soled shoes and the poor man nearly froze to death in there. Anyway, 250m^2 is a reasonable amount of space if you are catering for a family of four. It provides enough space to grow crops and to rotate those crops, which is good gardening practice. It also allows space for permanent shared fruit trees, possibly a greenhouse, and possibly the most important thing, which is a compost bin.

As we have found in Edinburgh, when a plot becomes free, it is halved so you get two people on, and the first thing to go is the compost bin. It sounds trivial, but it is important, because people start burning rubbish and throwing it away in landfill when it could be put back on to the ground. On my allotment site, we have had to build communal composting areas where people can dump their stuff and then come back and take compost back to their allotments. We have also recently been able to get a grant for a chipping machine to chop up stuff so that we can compost quicker. That is the reason for a size of 250m^2. Any smaller and you start losing bits that are important but are probably considered to be less important by a new allotment holder.

Jenny Reeves: The guidance allows for different sizes of plots. If you have allotments of 250m^2, mathematically you would get 40 plots to a hectare. Most allotment sites probably have quite a few more plots than that. You would probably get 60, maybe 70 plots, to a hectare. A lot of allotment sites have what they call starter plots, which might be a couple of beds, half plots, and then large plots of varying sizes. What makes an allotment different is that it is somebody's garden. It might be quite little but it is their garden. They design it, they create it, they nurture it, look after it and love it. There is something about that.

The guidance in the act allows for quite a variation in the size of plots and that bears with the population we have. We have people who are working two jobs, or something like that, and they still want to come out to a nice green space, but they do not have much time so they do not want a large plot. With a large plot, you must go down at least two days a week and put in several hours to maintain it. It is not light work. We need a variety of plot sizes.

Lou Evans: The legislation has always been flexible. Legislators safeguarded a size that they felt was workable and would give reasonable output. I have read one local authority food growing strategy that questioned the size and possibly used it as an excuse not to provide allotments, which I think is dangerous. This is a local authority in which tonnes of housebuilding is being done and land for food growing is being lost. That is worrying.

I do not know whether the others agree, but I do not think we should be diverted by size. Most of the local authority food growing strategies that I have read say that it is not an issue and that there is flexibility. We need to safeguard and hold on to land as much as possible.

If we really looked at how much land it would take to grow food for a family of four, we could see we that have an urgent issue with land, and we need to tie it into national planning framework 4, which is going through just now. We will have a serious problem if we do not safeguard land for all forms of food growing, including allotments, community growing, market gardens and farming. Adequate and appropriate land is being lost at a rate of knots at our peril, and we wrote the legislation—well, I did not. It is already dated for our times. Where will we be in 15 years? We urgently need to safeguard land and not throw out the 250m^2 rule.

Jenny Reeves: In the past, new developments have gone up and land has not been allocated.

Money has been handed over to local authorities, but it is not used for land for growing. As planning frameworks stand, in local place planning, 20-minute neighbourhood planning and planning generally, there is no category for land for growing. If becoming a good food nation and localising food are important, we need to change planning frameworks so that they encourage people to think that such land should be available.

Marie McNair: Richard Crawford, is there anything you want to add? I am sorry to put you on the spot.

Richard Crawford: Can you repeat your question?

Marie McNair: There were two parts to it. I did not ask the second part but it has been covered. I was asking about the panel's views on the guidance and any other support that the Scottish Government gave to local authorities when part 9 came into force in April 2018, and whether you were aware of that guidance. What else should be done to ensure compliance with the act?

Richard Crawford: I think that everybody is aware of the guidance. The 250m^2 is a bit of a strange number. In England the common size—I think they call it a perch—is 10 yards by 30 yards, which is a sizeable allotment. I used to have one when I lived in England, and it took up an awful lot of time.

The interesting thing is not the size, it is the quality. If people have big allotments, such as 300 square yards, or 250m^2, they tend to spread their produce out a bit more. With the smaller plots, people make use of the land more effectively. Earlier, Stuart McKenzie mentioned a report on somewhere down in Brighton, where they compared allotments to intensive farming and found that, metre for metre, allotments were producing the same amount of food as an intensive farming process would.

For example, in my allotments, plots do not come anywhere near 250m^2. The biggest we have is 150m^2, and since our waiting list has gone up, we have tended to split the bigger plots down. We are now thinking that that might be a mistake because if you reduce the size of the plots people will not get as much food as they might want for a family of four or five.

I agree with Lou Evans that the 250m^2 should not be a prescriptive size, and it is becoming a barrier in some instances where local authorities are saying, "We do not have the wherewithal to provide 250m^2 for as many people as want a plot". From my perspective, I do not think that that is being implemented overall. It is sometimes a matter of common sense—you have an area of land and you see how many smaller plots you can realistically fit in.

Marie McNair: We will be taking evidence from representatives of the councils as we proceed. Is there anything else that you would like us to raise with them or the Scottish Government?

Richard Crawford: Until last year, I was frustrated with Highland Council, because it did not have anything at all adhering to the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. Then last year, it engaged 10 people across the Highlands to consider a food growing strategy. There is still a lot of work to do; it is in its infancy, but I am encouraged by it.

Jenny Reeves said that money has not been allocated for new allotments and, in general, that is 100 per cent correct. Up here in the Highlands, a new town called Tornagrain is being developed just outside Inverness. One set of allotments has been put in and they have been totally taken up. I think that I am right in saying that a second set of allotments will be put in there. I am looking at what Highland Council is doing with great interest and am working closely with it, because I think that it is doing some good stuff.

Lou Evans: That has also been my experience of Highland. It is an example of a team that gets it and is trying, but it is taking time. It allocated a food growing strategy and a planning and food growing officer who contacted me with various enquiries, one of which was about managing expectation. The Highland Council was looking for land, but planning issues such as change of use and planning permission are slowing a lot of these things down.

Our experience with local authorities has been that, when departments of local authorities get it, the wheels turn a bit faster; planning is the obvious department to mention. The issue was in managing expectations. People were champing at the bit to get on to the land, but the process of putting in infrastructure and building new sites takes time.

Stuart McKenzie: It is happening in Edinburgh. Newcraighall is a big housing estate and part of it is allotments. The Edinburgh plan also has allotments, but it is not satisfying the needs of the waiting list. It is addressing the needs of the people who move into the houses there, but not wider society.

Jenny Reeves: It is the same in Glasgow. Growing spaces are being put in some new developments, but of course there is a lot of catching up to do. There is a lot of building where there was nothing.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I should start by declaring an interest, because I am one of the 5,000 on the waiting list in Edinburgh. You have answered a couple of my questions, but I want to return to a few points, specifically on access to

grants and other forms of funding. Stuart McKenzie, you said that you had received a grant for a chipper. What sort of funding streams are available to your organisation? I am specifically thinking about people who are trying to set up allotment spaces. Where would you recommend that they go to get grant funding?

Stuart McKenzie: My experience of setting up new allotment sites is not particularly broad, but I can tell a story of one out in Livingston that received a substantial grant from the climate challenge fund, which was available to communities but not to councils. Again, therefore, there is a disconnect. There is money there, but you must apply for it yourself and not via the council.

The Livingston site is a wonderful site. It was rather good that the climate challenge fund people insisted that no water was piped in because all the water is now collected from shed roofs. They have a composting loo, which is a very nice place to be, unlike a lot of Edinburgh allotment sites where we have water, but we do not have toilets. You find that people have to go in their sheds. It is good for the compost heap, though.

11:15

Jenny Reeves: Setting up is quite difficult. There is a big development at Ruchazie with a community trust, and it has a very large grant. Whether you get funding will depend on where you are. Our allotment site had grants from the National Lottery Community Fund at one time, and we have also had grants from Volunteering Matters and from our area partnership. Some people are concerned about climate issues, so we angle towards that. Others want to take care of community issues, so you angle to that.

It is quite difficult to get a large fund to do a project that you want, and setting up an allotment of a decent size would come under that kind of heading. For instance, the People's Plot are looking for grants to undertake surveys on land and that kind of thing. At one time the National Lottery Community Fund was giving money to people who said, "We want to set up a project and this is what we need to do" but it has stopped doing that now.

It is quite tricky. We have one person on our committee who specialises in funding, and they receive all the communication about grants, and then they get on with it. We often have to pick and mix from different offers of grants here and there.

Stuart McKenzie: They are all aimed at individuals rather than councils, are they not?

Jenny Reeves: For me, getting grant funding is quite difficult because you cannot say, "This is the project" and you cannot get somebody to say, "That sounds like a really good project in the round. Yes, we will back you." I found that the area partnership would do that within the limits it had, but many others tell us that we must demonstrate performance indicators, so we find ourselves writing quite mendacious bids. You cannot say, "This is what we want to do" because you must say what they want you to say. I do not know whether the other witnesses experience that same thing.

We are looking particularly at community gardens and similar places, and I think that they suffer from the same issues around short-term funding. You get started, you just get your head around it, and then you must sit down and start thinking about how you will put in for the next bit of grant that will enable you to do next year. It is not a good way of working. It would be better if you could say, "This is the project", the money rolls forward, and we measure how it is succeeding and look at things like wellbeing as it goes.

The Convener: That is a very good suggestion. Lou Evans wants to come in at this point.

Lou Evans: I think that we need to separate capital costs and revenue. The capital costs for a new allotment start-up site include the costs of things such as fencing, water infrastructure, water butts, sheds, pathways and accessible toilets. One local authority officer recently quoted me a cost of £1,000 per plot, more or less—I do not know whether Richard Crawford concurs with that. That is just infrastructure, not things like public liability and management.

With regard to revenue—I was not sure quite what your question was angling at—I could chew your ear for hours about the funding situation in our sector, particularly with regard to some of the projects that you have visited and have seen working preventatively. They are half the price of what the local authority could deliver and have arisen as a response to local need, so real empowerment, and yet many of those projects are working on short-term funding cycles on a bean. They sometimes lose people because people cannot afford to work in their own communities.

There is funding. I wish that it were better joined up and more collaborative. With the greatest respect to the Scottish Government, I note that there have been various streams of funding. As a network, we have said the same thing over and over: it needs to be adequate. Quite often, the funding that is rolled out from Government is inappropriate and, if we had just been invited to have a conversation about what was needed and what might be the best way of spending it, we would collaborate to ensure that the money is more appropriately spent and more widely spent.

The community growing forum, through the Scottish Community Alliance, can distribute some money from the Pockets and Prospects fund to small groups working in areas of disadvantage. There is a huge amount of flexibility with that money. We are talking of sums of only between £500 and £2,000. What is horrifying is that established groups that are delivering what are essentially statutory services are asking, "Can we have £500, please, to run a community meal next month?" That is not good enough. One of the benefits of that grant is that how it is spent is down to the community. They do not jump through hoops. As intermediaries, we are the people who say, "We know what you are doing". We endorse their application because they are known to us.

The community growing forum is made up of quite a few intermediary organisations that are experts and which support people on the ground—as we have established, many groups are volunteer-led and quite often need a phone call, a conversation, a resource to draw on or a little bit more support to keep going. We are on short-term funding cycles, quite often starting in April or May of a financial year with no idea whether we will have any money to carry on or whether we need to start looking for work.

We have more than proved that the models are cost effective. I think that we need to look at resource; I can guarantee that the resource would be adequately and appropriately spent, but we would like to have a conversation across all sectors of government about how we could work together and work preventatively in many cases in order to ensure that that resource is used effectively.

Richard Crawford: I will be brief. There is quite a wide range of funding sources out there. The big go-to is the National Lottery Community Fund and it has various drives every now and again. There are quite a few local options. The supermarkets—Tesco, Asda, the Co-op and Scotmid—all give out small funding amounts every now and again, which a lot of people access.

The Dandelion project has been a recent source—I think that I am right in saying that it was a Government-backed drive. Some organisations, such as Dandelion, are very prescriptive about what they will award funds for. For example, I think that Dandelion funding was connected to a harvest festival later in the year, but you had to have your application linked with the arts—for example, you had to involve a musician—and things like that, and, for organisations such as allotment groups, it is not practical to sort that out in a short time.

All the other organisations that SAGS has been involved with advertise funding opportunities from time to time, from the Scottish Community Alliance or whatever, and, in fact, SAGS is just about to hand out £12,000 of grants to our members. There is a wide variety of funding options out there, but the question is just whether they can be tapped into because of their restrictions.

Stuart McKenzie: The sums that are disbursed in that regard tend to be quite small amounts of money compared with the thousands that we need to create new allotment sites. Ian Woolard said yesterday that he could build a site for 200 people for about £400,000, so that puts the figure at nearer £2,000 per plot. I would say that that is a good investment.

Miles Briggs: Fencing seemed to come up a lot yesterday in the conversations that we had. We saw a project with a £35,000 fence—it was a deer fence, which was quite a basic fence but delivered the same outcome as a different type. It might be interesting to pursue that barrier and opportunities to get these things built more quickly. Even if the land is there, the fencing issue seems to hold back projects coming on stream.

Do you have anything to add about projects that you know have not gone forward because of that specific barrier—that is, the barrier of not being able to put up a barrier? You can let us know after the meeting if you are aware of any of those issues if you cannot do so now.

Stuart McKenzie: The only issue that I have come across is that we have a list of potential allotment sites in our Edinburgh allotment strategy. All the sites are classified as green space and as common good land, but the planners do not like common good land being fenced. However, I think that an allotment site needs some sort of barrier around it to keep access just for that community. That is the rub—identifying land and providing that land for an allotment site.

The Convener: It is quite illuminating that planners do not like common good land being fenced, and that is something to explore.

I am going to pick up the theme of the local food growing strategies. Lou Evans, you have started to share quite a lot of the extensive work that you have been doing in that regard. I am curious to get more of a sense from you of why there are approximately eight local authorities that still have not published their local food growing strategy, despite being required to have done so by April 2020.

Lou Evans: At the last count, I could find 18 of 32 strategies had been published. I know that a couple of those local authorities have allotment strategies, and I think that there has possibly been some confusion as to who includes what in a food growing strategy and who includes what in an allotment strategy—that might need to be unpicked a bit more—but I am aware that some people are well aware of their statutory obligations

and are prioritising. I am not here to make excuses for local authorities, but I do not think that they have had an easy time. As I said earlier, the key civil servant who was supporting them and driving that forward has left, and they have had to cope with Covid and a load of other things. There could be a whole load of reasons. There is only one local authority that has not published that I am aware of that is citing the pandemic as the reason why it has not published. I have no idea about the others that have not published.

Actually—here is some inside intelligence—we worked with one local authority employee who was with us in the forum for several years and was very diligent and forensic on the strategic environmental impact assessment, identifying land and the whole gamut, and she told us that when that council's food growing strategy reached committee it was thrown out. Who knows?

Without having the statistics and figures in front of me, I can say that it has been much easier to find local food growing strategies in dense urban areas—in the central belt and in the big cities. Those authorities say that they are doing what is on the tin—although we have heard that, in some cases that is not the case. They say that they are encouraging local food growing and that they understand the issue, although they have encountered some frustrations in relation to other bits of local government. Essentially, I cannot give you an answer.

The ones who have not published are the ones that we do not collaborate with. I have worked in the sector for a long time and I know quite a few of the people who have been in charge of food growing strategies. We work with them and share intelligence with them, and we put them in touch with one another in a way that, historically, has happened through the good food nation team, but we have lost resource there.

Off the top of my head, I think that the ones who have not published are largely more rural. Does that mean that there is not allotment demand in those areas? As Richard Crawford has highlighted, that is not necessarily the case in parts of East Ayrshire, so I cannot give you a definitive answer as to why they have not published. However, we are happy to work with anybody who wants to work with the forum, regardless of whether they have published a strategy.

The Convener: That is a great offer, and thanks for some of the insight.

Do you think that the food strategies that exist are doing enough to demonstrate how allotment and community growing space provision is meeting the needs of all communities, including those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage?

11:30

Lou Evans: Judging by the language, I think that some local authorities really get it. Whether the people who wrote the strategies are still in place or whether they were drafted in to write something and then left is an issue. I think that the strategies with action plans are good, as we are able to see who is working, how, with what and where, and then we are able to connect with them. It was evident from reading the strategies that there were a couple of people who needed to be put in touch with each other.

I think that a couple of people writing the strategies—I do not know whether they will then be charged with taking things forward in local government—clearly do not understand the different forms of growing in communities, and the bit that worries me is that they lose the tools at their disposal. If you are not aware of how diverse this sector can be—if you think that the solution is only one particular model—how can you solve a problem? We have multiple proven models across Scotland that need to be mainstreamed. We need more of them, more provision of all of it, so I think that that issue is a bit worrying.

Quite a few of the strategies talked about food, and quite a few of them got the language of the good food nation. Quite a few of them talked about risk and risk mitigation in terms of resource and not being connected to other bits of local government. Quite a few of them seem to have been written in isolation. Off the top of my head, I would say that that is possibly more about people coming to the table late and having written something because of the statutory requirement, whereas we have other local authorities that have been at this for quite a while because they have found the resource to do so and they have spoken to people involved in other areas, such as justice, planning and land. I would have to go back and think about this further, but it might be that the local authorities that came later to the table were only starting to think about how they were going to do things, whereas others that had been at it for a while had action plans and tried and tested models, so they understood the cross-sectoral opportunities, the need for equity and the need to link in food provision in order to make the strategies real in areas of economic and social disadvantage.

I will just counter something that I just said about rural communities. I do not want to name local authorities particularly, but Argyll and Bute Council, which is largely rural, has an excellent food growing strategy. I reverse what I said about some of the more rural local authorities, because that is a good one.

The Convener: I will bring in Paul McLennan on the theme of community organisations,

volunteering and planning. The time is 11:33, so we will probably go on for another 10 or 15 minutes before concluding.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I have three questions, but I will try to wrap them up into one, because I am conscious of time. When we visited Leith community croft last week, a few issues came up. One was about encouraging volunteering, particularly in areas where there are low levels of volunteering. A second issue is how that fits into the community wealth building agenda.

Another issue, which has been touched on, is where planning comes in. We have been discussing NPF4, and a lot of local authorities are preparing their local development plans, in which they should be looking at land for allotments. New developments have been mentioned, but we need to go beyond that. Do the witnesses have anything to add on planning?

My questions are about volunteering, community wealth building and planning in relation to community organisations, but the witnesses can add anything that they would like to that.

Lou Evans: We might have to revisit some of those questions, but let us start with planning. My feeling is that if our sector had more recognition, more status and mass engagement—that is the work of the forum—it would still be alternative. I do not mean alternative in a radical, hippy sense, but it is still alternative; it is not mainstream. The idea of people coming together in a green space to improve it, to grow food and to connect is not mainstream, but it needs to be if we are to address multiple societal issues, particularly the climate emergency.

Planning should come to us. We are a voluntary body; we work voluntarily. Most people who come to the table are not paid to be there. They are there because they are hopeful that, despite having been at the table for many years and having an enviable policy environment, they can still make this work. We are hopeful as a sector. I would like planning to come to us.

There are issues. In relation to the NPF and structural planning, we do not value green space and we do not allocate sufficient land for food provision. I am not talking about Scotland becoming self-sufficient. The NPF is laudable in that it talks about meeting climate targets and creating 20-minute neighbourhoods. That is wonderful, but there is very little about how we will be more resilient, how we will grow more of our own food and how we could—

Paul McLennan: We have talked about local place plans, which are key, in relation to NPF4. I represent East Lothian, which I understand has the longest waiting list in Scotland. In my own town of Dunbar, we have a community garden and allotments.

Lou Evans: Great stuff is going on in Dunbar.

Paul McLennan: There is also a community-owned grocery. The community has been very active in dealing with that, and there are lessons to be learned. The community got very involved in the local place plan. Do you want to add anything about local place plans? The more local the planning, the more chance of it happening.

Lou Evans: To go back to Jenny Reeves's point, I think that there is a massive disconnect, as we do not do things properly. I would like to get involved in my local community council, but there are too many barriers—I have kids, a job and an allotment. It is a matter of priorities. I am educated and empowered compared with many people who would benefit enormously from this. There is a massive disconnect—

Paul McLennan: That is something very powerful for us to take to our discussions with councils. If—

Lou Evans: It has taken me months of meetings to get three apple trees planted in my local community. I just want to do it; I do not really want to talk about it any more.

Jenny Reeves: We feel quite strongly about that. People want to do it, and if they could do it, they would work out what they wanted to do and how to organise. It is a matter of taking a risk and trusting people by letting them have a go, rather than putting up barriers.

We should have a way of evaluating that is far more evolutionary. We should say, "Okay, we'll suck it and see." If it does not work, we will not sit around asking who is to blame. We will think about what we can learn from that, what we will stop doing and what we will do next. We should carry on in that way.

I speak as someone who acted as a development officer for the Scottish Government at one time. You cannot write to people to tell them what will work. You have to get them in so that they can do it with you, and you must have a good feedback loop that picks up when things are not quite right. In that way, we will get longevity, because if people have a vision for having an allotment somewhere, they will want to see it develop. Having to spend all your time going through all this bureaucratic stuff and not being able to stick your trowel in the earth is totally the opposite of empowerment.

Paul McLennan: One of the main things that came through from last week's visit was the need for perseverance. It took a long time down in Leith. Other people might have walked away, but one or two key individuals pushed things forward. If they

had walked away, the whole thing would probably have collapsed.

Lou Evans: That is the case Scotland-wide, and I think that Richard Crawford would probably say the same. Community growing spaces are led by aspirational visionary people—you have met some of them—and they need to be cloned urgently.

Paul McLennan: Part of our role involves supporting that and raising the issue with local authorities. That was a key takeaway from the visit last week—I am sorry that I could not make the visit yesterday. A key takeaway from today is the need to build capacity. If we do not support and build capacity, people will walk away, and we will miss opportunities. That is coming through very strongly.

Jenny Reeves: I hope that you take away the point that capacity is a very strong thing to build and that it takes time to build. In planning, we must look at who we want to enable, how we ensure that they are in on it from the beginning and how we all learn together. We will make mistakes, because we have not done this before. That is not the end of the world. We can regroup and proceed.

Paul McLennan: Different authorities have different roles. Are they enablers or facilitators? If they are enablers, what is the role of facilitators? How can they support facilitation? That is a key takeaway for me, because we hear different stories from different parts of Scotland. If authorities are to be enablers, they should enable. If they are to be facilitators, they should provide support and build what they can. We are falling between the cracks, because if they are neither, there will be issues. That is a key thing to think about.

The Convener: Richard Crawford is keen to come in. It is hard for witnesses in the virtual space to come in, so I will let him get his wedge in. Come on in, Richard.

Richard Crawford: I will be brief again. Paul McLennan is absolutely right in what he has said. Historically, when I have been involved in local development plans, a broad-brush approach has been taken. The plans say that a certain area will be for housing, a certain area will be for commercial premises and a certain area will be for something else. What will be in the housing area needs to be broken down. I pushed for that with Highland Council for a long time, but it fell on deaf ears. I said that we should allocate areas for growing or whatever—I was not focused only on growing, because I was on the community council at the time.

Local development plans are key to all this. They should allocate land for community growing spaces, for example, as that is what we are focused on today. It is almost as though nothing has been done since the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill was passed in 2015. Perhaps someone from the Scottish Government should spend two or three days a week speaking to all the local authorities. They could say, "What's your strategy? Let's talk about it. Let's get something done and in place." The people who are empowered could then do it.

Lou Evans: The forum responded to the consultation on the NPF, and it almost killed us. I do not mean to appear critical, but the word "should" appeared too many times. "Should" is not good enough; it is too grey. Words such as "must" and "safeguard" should be used.

Paul McLennan: We have had that debate quite a few times on a few issues.

Lou Evans: You might also want to look at Aberdeen City Council, where a former colleague of mine—who is a planner but who understands food and green space provision—was involved in supporting its local development plan. They were key in ensuring that food-growing spaces were in the local development plan.

As a sector, we know what is needed. The recipe for success report highlighted that planning was an issue, yet, 10 years down the line, we are still talking about the need to bring planners on board. It is a chicken-and-egg situation. Planners need to be on board, but there has been a resource issue. We know at a forum level that we would like to be able to support local authorities with imminent local development plans, so that we ensure that we get adequate and appropriate land safeguarded, because who knows what models will be required? We know that planners need to be on board, but there has been a resource issue and an image problem. I think that I have made that quite clear.

Did Paul McLennan have a question about volunteering?

Paul McLennan: I am conscious of the time. We have touched on what the barriers are and what we need to do to support volunteering, so I am comfortable to move on. I have picked up some strong messages from the responses.

Stuart McKenzie: Once such things become mainstream and people expect them, we will not need a fence around a piece of ground.

The Convener: That is very true. This has been a rich conversation. Paul McLennan and the rest of us have gained a lot from it.

Lou Evans referred to "our sector". I think that you said what that is, but I would love it if you could encapsulate what you are imagining when you say "our sector".

Lou Evans: I am talking about anybody who wants to engage positively with green space in their local community. Food growing is an enormous part of what our sector does. I think that we felt emboldened to use the word “sector” when Covid struck. I spent a huge amount of time talking to civil servants about how we should get people out to allotments and community growing spaces, because that was what was required and the benefits far outweighed the risks.

Advocating for the sector generally is the role of the forum. We are a voluntary body that tries to act as a conduit between the grass roots and the Government. We have amazing policy, but what we need is action. We do not need any more policy; we need action. We need to collaborate, plan and think carefully about the opportunities and the risks of not taking action now. Our time has come. We have all been at the table for many years, and, for me, career-wise, it feels like now or never. We would like to do that in partnership, because it needs to be done in partnership. A lot of it needs to come from the top, but we need to have conversations, to work collaboratively and to take the politics out of it.

The Convener: Thank you. I have been in the community growing movement for a long time, and when you called it “our sector”, I wondered where that came from, so it is great to hear where it emerged. That is another benefit from our challenging time in the pandemic.

I thank all the witnesses for a rich discussion. I close the public part of today’s meeting.

11:46

Meeting continued in private until 12:09.

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