



Allotments and community growing: the impact of Part 9 of the Community Empowerment Act (Scottish Parliament Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee report)

To: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in Scotland. For information only to England, Northern Ireland and Wales

Key Issues:

The Scottish Parliament's Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee released a report entitled 'Allotments and community growing: the impact of Part 9 of the Community Empowerment Act'. The report "sets out a number of recommendations by the Committee which it invites the Scottish Government to respond to [as well as] proposed actions for local authorities".

Link to the full report - <https://sp-bpr-en-prod-cdnep.azureedge.net/published/LGHP/2022/10/6/b4e23742-49d6-434a-8b5b-175cf60144b3/LGHP062022R10.pdf>

1.0 Recommendations

The report features a series of recommendations from the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee has made to the Scottish Government to respond to. These include:

- Improvement and consistency could be driven by the Scottish Government having an increased leadership and oversight role that involved local authority benchmarking
- The Welsh Government should be liaised with about their progress with increasing access to allotments

- A national partnership forum could be created to enable councils to share their expertise and encourage cross-sectoral collaboration
- Legislation and strategies such as the Good Food Nation Bill, Biodiversity Strategy, Land Reform Bill, Agriculture Bill and others should stress the cross-cutting importance of allotments and food growing
- Local authorities should be given clarity on how the requirement to publish Food Growing Strategies intersects with the requirement to produce Good Food Nation strategies
- Local authorities could take steps to improve access to allotments including regularly reviewing allotment waiting lists to see if other growing opportunities would be more suitable (e.g. community gardens), monitoring the location of people on the waiting lists to link people together and increasing the awareness of allotments and growing spaces. The Committee also suggests that local authorities without sites should keep a register of interest for growing spaces
- Consider how food growing could be better incorporated into The Place Standard Tool in any future revisions
- The review of Scottish Government's Permitted Development Rights should consider whether land for growing could be added as a category of permitted development
- Frameworks (such as local place planning) should include food growing as a category of land use
- Local authority planning departments and council officers responsible for allotments and green spaces should consider closer working to allow for better integration of new development growing opportunities
- The complexity of the community asset transfer process should be considered by the Government, as it is a barrier to communities accessing land
- Any future reviews of the Act should explore whether Part 9 provisions could be extended to include allotment sites owned by other bodies and whether the definition of allotments could be broadened
- Funding grants should balance the importance of sustaining existing community products and funding innovation

- Food Growing Strategies need addressing within the Act as many authorities have not yet produced strategies

2.0 Background to the inquiry

The inquiry was set up by the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee to explore whether the Community Empowerment Act had improved the availability of allotments, reduced the barriers to accessing them, as well as finding out how communities are establishing allotments and the various benefits associated with allotments (e.g. health, educational, community, environmental).

The Committee held three formal evidence sessions with 16 representatives from local authorities, the public sector, allotment owners and community food growing organisations. APSE was also represented at these by APSE Chief Executive Paul O'Brien and Principal Advisor Wayne Priestley. Committee members also visited several allotments and community food growing projects to hear directly from local people. The Committee also welcomed the opportunity to take evidence from Scottish Government for the inquiry.

3.0 Local Authorities

The Community Empowerment Act placed a requirement on local authorities for waiting lists to be kept to a minimum of 50% of the number of allotments in the authority, and for the wait to be less than 5 years. Many respondents to the inquiry felt that this was impossible to deliver without receiving significant resources in support. Aberdeen City Council's waiting lists rose from 150 people to over 1,000 in 5 years; their waiting list is reviewed twice per year by contacting people to check if they still want an allotment. The demand has increased significantly for many authorities without the corresponding level of increase in support from the Government. Respondents to the call for evidence also broadly indicated that they felt waiting lists were not necessarily reflective of the scale of the demand for allotments and growing spaces. Reasons for this include that individuals may join multiple waiting lists, they may move away from an area or decide that they no longer require an allotment. It was also noted that most local authorities do not have a dedicated allotment officer, and that better support and information sharing would be

beneficial.

4.0 Allotments

Part 9 of the Community Empowerment Act requires local authorities to take reasonable steps to provide allotments, manage waiting lists and creates duties for the management of allotment sites. Local authorities also have to develop food growing strategies that identifies suitable land for community food growing or allotments, and explains how the authority plan to increase provisions for them. The current availability of allotments varies between areas, with some allotment sites run by the council and others run by volunteers; some authorities have few or no sites and residents may rely on the use of private sites. Demand for sites varies considerably too, with councils such as Edinburgh's waiting list having grown from 3,000 in 2019 to 5,600. This has been accelerated in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic fuelling people's interest in accessing outdoor space. It is clear that the current level of allotment provision does not meet the demand.

The benefits of allotments are clear and they can contribute positively towards many local authority targets, such as reducing carbon footprints, reducing loneliness and isolation, educational and skills opportunities, improving physical and mental health, and more. Some residents also see having an allotment as a means of dealing with the cost of living crisis and rise in food insecurity.

Visits to allotment sites showed the Committee how dependent on people's goodwill volunteer managed allotment sites are, with volunteers organising waiting lists, overseeing maintenance, organising resources and dealing with issues. There were many other challenges highlighted such as getting mains water connected or having to pay Scottish Water's commercial rates. There was also a feeling that council resources were prioritised towards the creation of new sites rather than maintaining established sites due to the need to meet targets for allotment numbers.

5.0 Community Gardens

Community gardens come in many different forms from orchards to raised beds on available land. They can be a useful introduction to growing for residents who may later move on to wanting their own individual allotment space; these kinds of informal opportunities to get started with growing and building their skills are invaluable. There are many problems facing community gardens with their long-term funding being one of the biggest. The Committee was informed that most grants are available for short-term projects, with many organisations competing for small amounts of funding, which can be very time consuming and resource intensive for small organisations.

6.0 APSE Comment

APSE encourages our members to engage with the contents of this report and thanks our member authorities who contributed their expertise to the evidence sessions. APSE's Parks and Greenspaces Principal Advisor Wayne Priestley was quoted as saying "It is interesting that a lot of local authorities now include the provision of allotments in local plans, health and wellbeing strategies and...biodiversity and climate change strategies.... Allotments bring in a multiplicity of benefits". APSE believes that local authorities should be looking at all of the different benefits that allotments and other forms of community growing can provide, and considering how this can be linked into the achievement of many different council goals around loneliness and isolation, physical and mental fitness, and a myriad of other benefits.

Wayne Priestley also spoke about what councils are having to do to meet allotment demands under current funding conditions: "many councils now cannot afford new sites, so they are looking at the size of their existing plots and considering halving or quartering them... There are all sorts of ways that councils are looking to keep down the cost of providing more allotments by utilising what they currently have". This highlights the kinds of decisions that local authorities are having to make in order to try and meet the requirements of the Community Empowerment Act without the funding they would need to deliver the best possible solution for residents. The Committee recognised that "local authorities do not have enough resources to simply create large numbers of new allotments to meet all demand. There are substantial costs involved in creating allotment sites because they need infrastructure such as fencing, water mains connection, pathways,

sheds and ideally accessible toilets too". With plots costing between £2,000 to £3,000 in many areas to establish, local authorities need to keep thinking innovatively about how existing provision can be adapted, and about the appropriateness of alternative means of growing provision.

APSE encourages our members to engage with the Welsh Government funded Resilient Green Spaces partnership project to learn all of the lessons from their work in this area. Finally, APSE backs the Committee's call for "a renewed effort to deliver on the intentions of the Act, led by the Scottish Government supporting local authorities", and would welcome a response from the Scottish Government to the recommendations outlined in the report.

Garry Lee
Research and Coordination Officer

Louise Melville
Principal Advisor (Scotland)