HEALTH AND SPORT COMMITTEE
SOCIAL PRESCRIBING OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND SPORT

SUBMISSION FROM Stuart McKenzie, Edinburgh Allotments Federation (FEDAGA)

Introduction

I am delighted that this committee has requested views on how Scotland’s health can be improved by prescribing physical activity. I have enjoyed cultivating an allotment for 30 years together with the benefits that I hope to demonstrate to the Committee.

Current Situation

Allotment provision in Scotland generally involves many years of waiting on a list until a plot becomes available. On my own site the last person to arrive had waited 13 years. Waiting lists are long and allotment plots are regarded as precious and difficult to obtain.

Councils have experience of allotment creation but lack the funding to create more sites. Indeed, the Edinburgh Allotment Strategy makes the point that no funding can be made available and that any new sites must be financed, created and run by community groups as defined in section 9 of the Community Empowerment Act.

Allotments – the benefits

The benefits of allotment gardening go well beyond the growing of fresh vegetables as this list, taken from the National Allotment Society, shows.

Social Capital

Gardening is good for you and allotment gardening offers additional benefits that help to ameliorate loneliness and enable citizens to contribute to society, especially beyond retirement. Hundreds of allotment holders volunteer on their association committee and give up precious time, helping to manage and maintain sites. Even on a site with no allotment association plot-holders are part of a community of like-minded people, many of whom are eager to share their knowledge and spare produce. The social contact offered by gardening in an allotment environment helps to combat the lack of social capital embodied by loneliness, which has the equivalent risk to health as consuming 15 cigarettes daily and is twice as harmful as obesity.

Contact with nature

Working a plot year-round means that allotment holders experience the seasons, witness the behaviour of birds, insects and other animals and gain an understanding of the eco-system. This appreciation of the natural world also has the potential to inspire more environmentally aware behaviour by themselves and their children.

In 2018 the UK Government produced a 25 Year Environment Plan, which acknowledges that connecting people to their environment will also improve their health and well-being. A study in the Netherlands showed that every 10 per cent
increase in exposure to green space translated into an improvement in health equivalent to being five years younger, with similar benefits found by studies in Canada and Japan.

A recent study by Edinburgh University found that allotments held the richest biodiversity in urban areas.

**Mental well being**

There is a growing awareness of the role that gardening plays in both preventing and alleviating mental ill-health. Many allotment gardeners will tell you that a spell on the plot nurturing plants and contemplating nature makes them feel calmer and more hopeful and there have been recent studies that have measured this benefit.

**Sense of achievement**

As many new plot-holders discover, growing vegetables requires acquiring new knowledge and skills and the satisfaction gained from eating their first home grown tomato or new potato makes them taste even more delicious!

**Healthy activity**

The physical benefits of regular spells of gardening help plot-holders to keep fit even if they have sedentary jobs, the physical exercise also contributes to their mental well-being. Gardening can also help to maintain good gait and balance in older gardeners and help with cognitive decline.

Spending as little as 15 minutes a day out in the summer sunshine can build up your levels of vitamin D, if you are fair skinned. And for those whose skin is naturally darker, anywhere up to 90 minutes of sun exposures will help your vitamin levels. However, gardeners do need to be aware of skin cancer risks, especially on very hot, sunny days and dress appropriately.

**Fresh, local, seasonal produce**

If managed properly, an allotment can produce enough food to supplement a family’s weekly shop, with fresh fruit and vegetables over the year. Allotment gardeners can choose to garden organically and avoid ingesting chemicals that are likely to be present on shop bought fruit and vegetables.

In a survey of National Allotment Society members nearly every person said their love of allotment gardening comes from the fresh air, home grown produce, healthy lifestyle and like-minded people this activity offers.

**Evidence-based Studies of the Health Benefits**

There have been numerous academic studies to back up these claims of the health benefits of gardening. Work by Soga et al (2017), appearing in the international journal *Preventive Medicine Reports*, found 22 well-conducted studies. They conclude:
Our meta-analysis has provided robust evidence for the positive effects of gardening on health. With an increasing demand for reduction of health care costs worldwide, our findings have important policy implications. The results presented here suggest that gardening can improve physical, psychological, and social health, which can, from a long-term perspective, alleviate and prevent various health issues facing today’s society. We therefore suggest that government and health organizations should consider gardening as a beneficial health intervention and encourage people to participate in regular exercise in gardens.

Cost of an Allotment Plot

A new allotment site was opened at Killandean, Livingston as a community-led project. It benefited from grants from the Climate Challenge Fund and has facilities that far exceed most sites, particularly in Edinburgh where toilets are rarely available in sites.

The total cost was £110,000 for 44 plots (22 full sized plots, 22 half plots). The site has a meeting room, communal secure storage and a composting toilet. Mains water is not provided, instead water harvesting is encouraged from a communal roof and individually from the shed on each plot. Individual composting facilities are also available.

The Killandean example provides an idea of the one-off cost to establish such facilities at around £3,000 for a full-sized plot and a half plot £1,500.

An annual rental is paid by each plot holder to maintain the site and pay whatever the local authority sets as ground rent.

Opportunity

I believe that Scotland’s health and mental wellbeing can be improved simply by providing spaces outside on which citizens can grow their own food. Full sized plots are defined as being 250 square metres which is possibly beyond many people’s capabilities but smaller spaces could be created, along with facilities I’ve outlined.

The issue to solve is how to fund these new growing spaces? Traditionally local Councils have been given responsibility for their provision under the various Allotment Acts. They are now unable to invest any of their cash-strapped budgets.

The benefits I’ve outlined will improve Scotland’s health, improve its biodiversity and reduce food miles.

What Scotland must do is to believe this, encourage growing food as a beneficial physical activity and fund the creation of spaces on which this activity can be carried out. Local Councils are simply not able.

There will be some additional initiatives to ensure we get the best use from these growing spaces. Examples would include some form of basic training in growing, possibly assistance through a mentoring system? All solvable – and useful to improving everyone’s diet and health.
Specific question responses

1. To what extent does social prescribing for physical activity and sport increase sustained participation in physical activity and sport for health and wellbeing?

Growing food encourages continual attention. Whether it is in the winter, when ground is prepared and plans made for the following season, to planting, growing, weeding and harvesting. Sustained involvement is therefore crucial.

2. Who should decide whether a social prescription for physical activity is the most appropriate intervention, based on what criteria? (e.g. GP, other health professional, direct referral from Community Link Worker or self-referral)

No opinion.

3. What are the barriers to effective social prescribing to sport and physical activity and how are they being overcome?

Lack of knowledge of growing could be a barrier but overcome through coaching and mentoring. A great deal of ‘how to’ information exists online.

4. How should social prescribing for physical activity and sport initiatives be monitored and evaluated?

Are the crops doing better than the weeds? Are the participants engaged and happy?