

# **LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 18 September 2001  
*(Afternoon)*

Session 1

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## LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

23<sup>rd</sup> Meeting 2001, Session 1

### CONVENER

\*Trish Godman (West Renfrew shire) (Lab)

### DEPUTY CONVENER

\*Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab)

### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

\*Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

\*Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)

\*Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

\*Iain Smith (North-East Fife) (LD)

\*Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP)

\*attended

### WITNESSES

Stewart Arthur (Glasgow City Council)

Herbert Coutts (City of Edinburgh Council)

Dr Mike Cuthbert (City of Edinburgh Council)

Grant Findlay (Glasgow City Council)

Peter Sandwell (Dundee City Council)

Ian Woolard (City of Edinburgh Council)

### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Irene Fleming

### ASSISTANT CLERK

Craig Harper

### LOCATION

Committee Room 2



## Scottish Parliament

### Local Government Committee

*Tuesday 18 September 2001*

*(Afternoon)*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:00*]

### Items in Private

**The Convener (Trish Godman):** Okay, comrades, we shall start business.

Does the committee agree to take agenda items 4 and 5 in private? We are considering a draft report in respect of item 4 and, under item 5, we shall be discussing personal details of a witness's travel arrangements.

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Allotments Inquiry

**The Convener:** We return to the allotments inquiry. Those who were members of the committee at the time will recall that we started the inquiry in February. Today, we shall be hearing from three city councils. We had asked witnesses from Aberdeen City Council to come along today, but the relevant staff were committed to another engagement. However, we may receive some written evidence from them.

I am pleased to welcome witnesses from Glasgow City Council. We have with us Stewart Arthur, who is the events manager in the administration department, and Grant Findlay, who is the assistant horticultural officer.

I must declare an interest before our proceedings begin. My allotment is run by the Glasgow witnesses, although my questions would probably have alerted the committee to that fact anyway. The witnesses may make short introductory statements, after which I shall allow questions.

**Grant Findlay (Glasgow City Council):** Good afternoon and thank you for inviting us to the meeting.

Historically, the allotments in Glasgow have been dealt with by a number of busy people from several departments who have done what they could with the resources available. There has not been an allotments officer in Glasgow. Many of the sites were owned by the planning department; others were owned by the housing department, the parks department or private authorities. Recently, all the council sites came under the auspices of the land services department, which controls parks and roads. The mixture of private and council sites in Glasgow adds up to about 1,500 plots.

Members will have a copy of our submission. Much of the council's advisory role is carried out by the horticultural section, which helps sites to help themselves. We have two types of allotment groups, one of which is fairly proactive, in that it tries to help itself. It will look for funding and it will provide labour to work on the sites—it wants to make a go of things. The other type goes cap in hand to the council, saying that the council is not doing anything and that everything is rubbish. The allotment section deals with those two different attitudes.

We have tried to help sites to help themselves. Resources are limited, but keen and proactive sites will receive as much guidance as we can give them. Our submission lists some ways in which we have helped sites. For example, in Hamiltonhill in the north of the city near Possilpark,

the site had 10ft-high barbed-wire fences and hedges. Each plot was like a fortress. People did not speak to one another. They were only interested in doing their own thing. Much of the site was a drinking den—drink can be a problem on some of the sites.

During the past five years, all the fences and hedges have been ripped out. New open-plan allotments have been set up. New paths, new roads, new fencing and new water facilities have been established. The allotment group provided all the labour itself. Perhaps three or four elderly gentlemen barrowed 100 tonnes of type 1 road stone to create a new roadway. Such enthusiasm and interest in the plots is great. We fully support it.

The parks and open spaces strategy document that we launched a few years ago highlighted the fact that allotments are important to the city. The council has put its money where its mouth is and said that it will continue to support allotments where there is recognised local demand for them. The sites are private as well as council-owned.

We do not just provide practical help. We often help in the rewriting of constitutions for sites. For example, one person may have operated the site for 20 years. When that person dies, the whole thing falls apart. It is the nature of allotments that only one or two key people look after administrative matters. We have had to help associations to rewrite their rules and form committees. We have taken them step by step through the procedures for managing the sites.

If we just threw someone off the site because we did not like him or because he fell out with someone, that would not work. Allotment groups must understand that they need to go through the rules and regulations word by word. The committee would be amazed by the number of lawyers who become involved in disputes involving people arguing over, for example, the 10 slabs that were on the plot when someone new took it over. Lawyers' letters are sent to the council.

Many interesting people are involved in allotments. We encourage and help them when we can. In the old days, one person was not specifically responsible for the plots. Everyone did what he or she could. The administration section would collect the money. The horticultural advisory section would help with grant funding, horticultural advice, composting and manures. The rules were written in 1929, but the council did not really enforce them. They were updated in the 1950s, but they are now out of date, which is something that we must look at. However, under the auspices of Stewart Arthur, administrative matters are now dealt with in a one-stop shop. Perhaps my colleague will say something about that.

**Stewart Arthur (Glasgow City Council):** As recently as June we appointed an officer in our golf and ancillary section who has sole responsibility for looking after allotments. She has been liaising with local groups in Glasgow, along with some directorships. She has also purchased a software package to set up a decent database. The information that we have in Glasgow is not entirely accurate but, I hope, matters will improve.

**The Convener:** I have two quick questions. Grant Findlay talked about some allotments where people drank. Is such an activity considered as drinking in a public place?

**Grant Findlay:** Yes, allotments are public places.

**The Convener:** There goes my glass of wine after I have finished the digging.

The submission refers to the council liaising with Gartnavel hospital. Will you expand on that?

**Stewart Arthur:** We were approached by the occupational therapy unit at Gartnavel hospital. Its long-term patients used to garden in the grounds of Gartnavel, which has now been taken over for new build. We had some vacancies at the Saxon Road allotments in Knightswood and the hospital took on eight plots, where the patients do cultivation work as part of their therapy.

**Iain Smith (North-East Fife) (LD):** The second paragraph of the submission states:

"The City Council will support allotment provision where there is identified local demand."

When we took evidence from the Kelvinside Allotments Association, Judy Wilkinson said that there was a lot of untapped demand for allotments. Has the council undertaken research to determine whether there are any areas in which there may be a demand for allotments? Alternatively, does the fact that there are no allotments mean that such a demand cannot be identified?

**Grant Findlay:** A few years ago, we carried out a survey of all the allotments in the city, both private and council-owned. We wanted to know how many plots there were, what facilities were available and how the council could help. Some people said that it would be helpful if they could have facilities, whereas those on some private sites said that they managed their own sites and that the matter was nothing to do with the council.

We asked in our survey about waiting lists and how they were managed. The responsibility for allotment management is devolved. It is up to the individual allotment associations to set up a committee and run their own affairs, part of which is the management of waiting lists. Some associations have split sites. That is the case in

Kelvinside, which is split between Julian Avenue and Kirklee Road. The one at Julian Avenue is owned by Glasgow City Council and the one at Kirklee Road is owned by the University of Glasgow. One of the sites was a replacement for another bit of ground that was run by the university but had been built on—it was a prime site. There is a long waiting list—it takes two to three years to get a plot at those sites. Other sites in the city have had vacant plots for some time. Circumstances vary throughout the city.

In the past year or so, allotment groups have begun to communicate with one another. They were very insular, but communication has increased through the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society and we hope that the allotment groups in the city will speak with a concerted voice. That will help to channel information to the council and to allow us to get feedback.

**Iain Smith:** Does the council have any role in managing the plots? If it knows of vacant plots, does it contact people who are waiting in other areas?

**Grant Findlay:** If members of the public phone the council looking for a plot, the standard practice has been to send them out a list with the contact names of the secretaries of all the city sites. It is up to the individual to contact the site in which they are most interested and put their name on the waiting list. They might join another association as well to see whether a vacancy comes up. That is the extent of our role in the promotion of allotments

**Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP):** Is demand in the city centre—Kelvinside and the west end—greater than in other areas of Glasgow, such as Possilpark or Maryhill? If so, does the council have any plans to cultivate—I chose the right word—other areas and create more allotment spaces?

**Grant Findlay:** Hamiltonhill is the main site in Possilpark. There are only 30 or so plots, but more than 100 people use that site. Raised beds were created for the Possil and Milton Forum on Disability—the bus can drive right in and the raised beds allow wheelchair access. A steel store was put in. A drug rehabilitation project is based at the site. There is a nursery school adjacent to the allotments, which was refenced so that the nursery children could have safe access directly to their secure plot. Although there are not many plots, many groups use them.

I am not aware of any plans to develop new sites. Citywide, there is enough allotment ground just now. There are not enough plots in some parts of the city where demand is higher. However, there would have to be demand before we created new plots. If we created a site and simply hoped for people to come along, we would

end up investing a lot of money that could be wasted if there was not sufficient uptake. In areas where there is a long waiting list, it is clear that there is high demand.

**Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab):** I want to ask a little more about the organisation of the allotments. I am sorry if I am a little naive about this. You said that allotments are dealt with by the land services department, which also looks after parks and roads. Does the parks and open spaces strategy include playing fields? What other areas are included along with allotments?

You also said that the officer responsible for allotments is based in Stewart Arthur's department—the administration department. The officer is preparing an up-to-date database, but how does the council look after the allotments area? How is it marshalling the things that you listed in your paper, which essentially relate to advice to allotment holders? Is everything done in the land services department or are a number of departments involved?

I do not think that you mentioned anything about finance, although finance is obviously involved, as you are giving a lot of advice. Could you give us some figures for the annual budget that you think goes into allotments? Which department does that money come from?

14:15

**Stewart Arthur:** I will start with the final question. All our plots have an average budget of about £1,100, which covers skips, water provision and routine maintenance such as fence repairs. Glasgow still runs a grounds maintenance contract. Any special fencework would go through on what we call a special job ticket, to get the job done outwith the grounds maintenance contract, under ancillary and miscellaneous payments. In general, however, the figure is £1,100 for water and skips and so on.

**Dr Jackson:** Per allotment area?

**Stewart Arthur:** Yes.

Our new officer will take a one-stop approach, but she is not all-singing, all-dancing. If she needed horticultural advice, she would go to sections such as Grant Findlay's. However, she will be the main contact for allotment secretaries for skips or for water if they have problems with that. She will get other departments to respond to any inquiries. She was given that responsibility because, as Grant Findlay said, people used to have to go to five or six different departments, such as plumbing and cleansing. The new approach assists in the administration of the allotments.

I have forgotten your other question.

**Dr Jackson:** The first question was what the open spaces strategy covers besides allotments.

**Stewart Arthur:** It covers every piece of green ground in Glasgow that our department maintains, which involves grass cutting and so on. We maintain football pitches, although we do not allocate the bookings. That is done by the culture and leisure department, which has responsibility for sport provision.

**Dr Jackson:** Would it be possible to have a copy of the parks and open spaces strategy?

**Grant Findlay:** The strategy refers to all the ground that is the parks department's responsibility, which ranges from George Square in the city centre—the events space, which is one of the areas that Stewart Arthur manages—to a bit of grass in a housing estate, and from Pollok country park to Victoria park. It includes any park in the city and anywhere that is seen as part of the green environment of the city but over which the parks department does not have direct responsibility. Allotments were identified under that as part of amenity open space. They are for the benefit of the general public. People have to be members to get access to the sites, but the space is there for all—it is not just a wee private thing. The public should be able to access allotments.

When the open space document was written, allotments were one of the areas that received a lot of input. A draft policy was prepared, which got a lot of feedback from allotment holders. Allotments have been identified so that they can be protected and the council can state its long-term commitment to them.

As for producing advice, over the past few years I have done all the things on the list apart from taking the rents. I was involved in horticultural matters and in liaising with all the groups advising on site developments.

**Dr Jackson:** I have a supplementary about the officer. A one-stop shop is now operating. Is the officer involved full-time?

**Stewart Arthur:** Yes.

**Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP):** I was interested in all the local organisations that are responsible for allotments. You said that responsibility for allotments is devolved to local organisations and you touched on the fact that help is needed with matters such as constitutions. Does the council provide guidance and guidelines on how constitutions should be drawn up for council-owned allotments and, in particular, on how people can join waiting lists? From your comments, it seems that it is up to people to contact secretaries, who then determine how long they have to wait and whether they will be

accepted on to the waiting list. Are you undertaking any work to ensure that people have access?

**Stewart Arthur:** To ensure that everyone is running under the same type of constitution, we take the local association through a draft constitution that is based on a citywide pro forma document. We then write up the constitution for the association.

**Tricia Marwick:** The point that I am trying to get at is that some of the constitutions are very old and there might be a problem with them. Would you consider issuing guidance and guidelines to associations to ensure that they adopt the model constitution that you have drawn up?

**Grant Findlay:** The point is valid. Certain council rules and regulations apply to all council sites and we have given help when groups have asked for it. As many of the sites are well-run, the attitude has been, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." However, we have held meetings in local schools—at night, when folk could attend—to go through the draft constitution, get the full constitution agreed by the members and then start the allotment association up again. That happened in Balornock in the north of Glasgow and the process has worked for a while. That said, the key to a good allotment association is putting together a team on each site that is interested, keen and prepared to take some responsibility for the management of the site.

**Tricia Marwick:** It is also true that, in order to continue that process, new people need to come in all the time and take on some of the weight of responsibility. I am concerned that some of the constitutions might not be particularly welcoming and indeed might put obstacles in the way of people who want allotments.

**Grant Findlay:** No. The people who manage the site put up obstacles. For example, if someone's face does not fit, they might not get on to the waiting list or, if they do, they might be on it for a very long time. The problem is not the paperwork or the constitution.

**Tricia Marwick:** If the model constitution and the paperwork were in place, it would be much more difficult for individuals to carry on like that. If we want allotments to have a future, we must ensure that people who want them are offered the opportunity and are not stopped by other people's attitudes. Until the constitutions are in place, it will be difficult for the city council to take action against a committee or association.

**Stewart Arthur:** You are absolutely right. One of the new officer's roles will be to update some of the constitutions, some of which go back to the 1950s. The council's new draft constitution is only two or three years old and the new officer will try



to standardise constitutions across council-owned allotments. However, the problem is that standardisation might not happen across privately owned plots.

**Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** Do you experience many problems with vandalism on the allotments?

**Stewart Arthur:** In certain areas, yes. Queen's park is heavily vandalised and, in the west end, Victoria park and the allotments at Scotstoun are vandalised.

**Mr Harding:** Who pays for the results of vandalism? Is that dealt with through the council's budget or by the allotment holders?

**Stewart Arthur:** It is paid for from the council's budget.

**Mr Harding:** What is the average cost of rental of an allotment in Glasgow?

**Stewart Arthur:** The rental for a plot is £26 a year.

**Mr Harding:** Have you calculated how high the subsidy is for allotments, bearing in mind costs such as service charges and vandalism?

**Stewart Arthur:** The rent has gone up a lot this year. For a number of years it was £6.50; this year is the first time that the cost has gone into the twenties. That is a major increase and we took a lot of flak from the allotment holders. The increase was to combat the high bills that we had for work such as fencing replacements.

**Mr Harding:** You do not know the level of subsidy.

**Stewart Arthur:** Not at the moment.

**The Convener:** You said that some sites have plots that are not used. The problem might be that the management committee is not doing its job, so people do not know about the plots. How do you get involved in that issue? Is there advertising in Glasgow—in magazines, for example—informing people that they can put their names down for an allotment?

**Stewart Arthur:** Not to date.

**The Convener:** Can you tell me how many plots are not being used or do you not receive that information?

**Grant Findlay:** Stewart Arthur's team knows the number of plots with rents that have been paid. His team collects the rent and issues the missive—the annual paper that states that a person has rented a plot for a year. The council is aware of the number of plots that have been rented.

**Stewart Arthur:** I suspect that at the moment we have fewer than 20 unused plots in the city.

**The Convener:** Given that answer and your statement that some parts of the city are better than others for numbers of allotments, do you have plans to free more land for allotments? Apart from the open spaces, I am thinking about railway lines that have allotments at the side. Do you plan to talk to Railtrack about freeing more land for allotments?

**Grant Findlay:** Not as far as I am aware.

**The Convener:** Could the significant waiting lists for allotments in Glasgow be reduced if sites for allotments were found?

**Stewart Arthur:** Yes, in certain areas.

**Ms White:** You said that about 20 per cent of plots in Glasgow are underused. It would be a good idea to identify and advertise those plots.

**Grant Findlay:** I said that there were 20 unused plots out of 1,500.

**Ms White:** Sorry. It would be a good idea to advertise them.

If someone identified a piece of spare ground, could they approach the council to ask for permission to have an allotment?

**Grant Findlay:** Yes. We would have to speak to the planning and development department to discover whether the plot was council land or, if not, who owned it. However, there is not much interest in establishing an allotment association. To install fencing and a water supply and to lay out the site and build a steel hut is a major investment. There would have to be an established and proven waiting list of people who wanted to use the site.

**Ms White:** I hope that this question is not controversial, but I want to clear something up. Are there any allotment sites that are owned by the council under the housing revenue account and that might be affected by the housing stock transfer in Glasgow?

**Grant Findlay:** I do not know. Some of the sites were on housing land and some were on planning and development land. All the council sites now come under the remit of the land services department. All I can say is that the council is fully committed to retaining the allotment ground. We have no plans to change the use of that land.

**The Convener:** I will ask the reverse of that question. If allotments were sitting on ground that could be useful to the council—if, for example, somebody wanted to buy the land and build on it—does the council have a policy to move people who are allotment holders on the site somewhere else? Is that taken into consideration?

14:30

**Grant Findlay:** The protection of that land would be covered under the parks and open spaces strategy document, in which we stated that we support allotments and will continue to do so.

Many of the allotment sites are on prime land within residential areas, so developers always have their eye on them. I am sure that many developers have worked out how many houses they could build on such sites. That is a continuing concern on allotment sites such as Kelvinside; a huge new block of flats, each of which will sell for hundreds of thousands of pounds, has been built near there, beside Kirklee Road.

The council knows how important allotments are and wants to continue to support them. It would be great to find more land in the west end to alleviate the waiting list for that part of the city, but the council must decide on its attitude to allotments and how far up the list of priorities they should be. We support allotments fully and want to protect them.

**The Convener:** There are no further questions. Thank you very much.

I welcome the witnesses from the City of Edinburgh Council: Herbert Coutts is the director of recreation; Ian Woolard is parks development officer, allotments; and Dr Mike Cuthbert is the allotment strategy consultant. The format is the same as for the previous witnesses. You should make an introductory statement, after which I will open up the meeting to questions.

**Herbert Coutts (City of Edinburgh Council):** Thank you, convener. We intend to say only a few words in introduction. The committee has received a statement from us, which gives a breakdown of the allotment situation in Edinburgh. I do not want to repeat the information that was included in the statement; perhaps we can build on it.

I was keen to bring Ian Woolard and Dr Cuthbert with me. Ian Woolard is that rarest of creatures—an allotment officer. I thought that the committee might be interested to hear from an allotment officer who deals directly with allotment holders. Dr Cuthbert has appeared before the committee before, in his Food Trust Scotland capacity. He is acting as our consultant on the continuing work on the Edinburgh allotment strategy and will be happy to speak about that.

In Edinburgh, we do not see allotments as being in a separate box from the rest of our land. The recreation department is responsible for the management and development of 1,600 hectares of open space in the city, 42km of walkways and 112 parks—I am referring to the service plan so that I get the figures right. My parks department colleagues have even counted the number of trees

for which we are responsible. I can tell members, if they are interested, that we manage 350,000 mature trees. The recreation department also has responsibilities for opera houses, concert halls, museums, galleries and libraries, for example. The 60 acres of land that we give over to allotments is only a small part of the land that we manage. We try to see our allotments as part of a joined-up package of responsibilities. They are important in what they can give to allotment holders.

During the course of its investigations, the committee will ask local authorities and others how they provide allotments and services. The committee should take into account the fact that local authorities receive no central Government support for the provision of allotment services in Scotland. Central Government would probably say that support comes from grant-aided expenditure, but there is no specific support for allotments. On completing its investigations, the committee may take the view that there should be more allotment developments in Scotland, particularly in the cities where land values are high. Local authorities might then say, "That is fine. We would be only too happy to co-operate, but is financial support available to local authorities from the Government in Scotland to assist with allotments?"

The committee knows about the legislative differences between Scotland and England. However, Michael Cuthbert pointed out to me recently that the new opportunities fund green spaces and sustainable communities programme in England mentions allotments specifically, whereas the Scottish programme does not mention allotments at all. There is a possibility that lottery money, for example, will be made available in one area but not in another. Government and the lotteries seem to be adopting slightly different points of view in two parts of the United Kingdom.

We would welcome a national strategy for allotments. When the committee took evidence previously, the fact that Edinburgh was about to embark on an allotment strategy was referred to, as was the fact that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities was considering the possibility of developing advice. One committee member felt that it might have been slightly premature for the City of Edinburgh Council to proceed with an allotment strategy—however, any strategy can be changed.

I want to draw the committee's attention to the recent document, "Growing in the community: a good practice guide for the management of allotments", which was published by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, I think. There is no point in COSLA reinventing the wheel that this excellent document is. Perhaps the document could be topped and tailed by COSLA, but its good advice for

allotments in England applies equally well in Scotland. When we saw the document, we drew it to Michael Cuthbert's attention—albeit that he was already aware of it—so that he could take it into account in his work on the allotment strategy for Edinburgh.

If I may, I will shut up at this point. Perhaps Ian Woolard could say something, and then Dr Cuthbert.

**Ian Woolard (City of Edinburgh Council):** I hope that I will not ramble on too much.

**The Convener:** I will stop you if you do.

**Ian Woolard:** I feel that my job for the City of Edinburgh Council is privileged. I am the only employee who deals with allotments.

My main job is to send, receive and process applications, maintain waiting lists, send out offers, allocate plots when they become available, visit sites and meet contractors. I have various duties and the work keeps me busy.

The most important advantages of allotments are probably the social and health benefits that they provide. I have been in my job for seven or eight years and have done day-to-day visits around the sites, or weekly visits, depending on where I am. For many people, allotments are their only hobby. They provide a good way of meeting friends and are a cheap way for people to grow their own fruit and vegetables. If there were no allotments, many people would probably be lost. Allotments provide people with exercise and therefore health benefits. They are a cheap source of food and attract wildlife such as foxes, bats, birds and insects—that is beneficial.

In the past seven or eight years, the City of Edinburgh Council has been very proactive. It has spent a lot of money on allotment sites—between £100,000 and £150,000 has been spent during that period. Most of that money has been spent on pathways, water supplies, fencing and storage containers. We have taken big steps forward and improved the sites as best we can.

I like the job because I meet a range of people and personalities. I sometimes have to deal with difficult people, but usually I resolve problems eventually.

**Dr Mike Cuthbert (City of Edinburgh Council):** I will be brief. Since I last had the privilege of appearing before the committee, we have done detailed work in Edinburgh. We have conducted the first major survey on individual plot holders in the city and we had a fantastic response rate of 71 per cent. One of the most interesting facts about the response is that 41 per cent of the respondents were female. I was quite surprised by that, and it might be surprising to many people. The response says something about demand.

I think that Edinburgh is unique in the UK in that every site in the city has a waiting list. There is no question but that there is demand, which could be increased by a wider advertising campaign. The city is interested in expanding the provision of its estate, but it should do so carefully and on a phased basis.

I have looked in detail at the situation south of the border and there is an overall general vacancy rate of about 25 per cent, although the quality of service is generally much higher than in Scotland. The allotment estate in England is much larger. There are 7,500 allotments in Birmingham, for example, and 3,500 in Bristol, which has a vacancy rate of 36 per cent, despite the fact that allotments are a major investment and commitment.

There is, therefore, great demand in Edinburgh, but quality should be considered. Edinburgh and Scotland must work to improve the general appearance and design of allotments, which can often be shanty towns. Generally speaking—we found this in Edinburgh, too—plot holders do not envisage major changes in that area, but we should try to encourage higher standards in general park and public open spaces.

**The Convener:** The Glasgow City Council witnesses seemed to be saying that most of the allotment sites are managed by people on the sites. I have read your report and listened to what Ian Woolard said. In the City of Edinburgh Council, someone is identified as an allotment person—that is relatively new. Ian, you seem much more aware of what is going on at each site than Glasgow City Council is. Is that because you have been in post for a number of years as a recognised person to be contacted and you go out to look at the sites?

**Ian Woolard:** Yes. I have been in post for almost eight years. People get to know who I am, as they do with people in other jobs. I have my eye on the sites all the time.

**The Convener:** We took evidence from Tony Stanton of the Federation of Edinburgh and District Allotments and Gardening Associations, who said:

“The federation urged the City of Edinburgh Council to devolve management of sites to a number of local associations on a trial basis. That scheme has been running for close to 18 months now. There was to have been a report on the results of that trial after a year.”—*[Official Report, Local Government Committee, 13 February 2001; c 1595.]*

It seems that the federation was asking you to move away slightly from what you were doing. Is that correct?

**Ian Woolard:** With devolved management, the plan was for two trial sites. However, we have spoken to the Federation of Edinburgh and District

Allotments and Gardens Associations and the trial has not expanded as much as we thought it might. Some other sites are not too happy about being involved in devolved management. Every month or six weeks, I meet about five committees on my site visits. The committees are happy with the situation, but perhaps they regard devolved management as giving the committees too much power. My overall impression is that they would prefer the council to take control and administration to be done centrally.

14:45

**The Convener:** There is an element of continuity in that, too.

Dr Cuthbert said that 41 per cent of respondents to his survey were women. Does he have details of the age range of those women?

**Dr Cuthbert:** Yes. The majority tend to be over 40, but there is an increase in the number of younger women, particularly on some sites.

**The Convener:** Can the committee have a copy of the results of your survey?

**Herbert Coutts:** Yes, I am sure that the council would be only too happy to provide the results. After the strategy is completed, the survey results will be fed in. The strategy will then go to the council's executive and, on approval, it will be made available to the committee.

**The Convener:** That would be helpful.

**Iain Smith:** I should like some clarification. Your submission refers to 1,000 plots and a waiting list of 453. The strategy consultant's submission refers to 1,184 plots and a waiting list of 1,100. Which figures are correct?

**Herbert Coutts:** I made the same point to colleagues last week. The fact that there are half plots can sometimes lead to confusion. In essence, the number of plots is the same, although the recent decision to close down one allotment site has affected the number of plots available.

**Iain Smith:** My main concern is about the number on the waiting list. The figure of 453 is less than half of 1,100. How many people are waiting for plots?

**Ian Woolard:** There are only 453. When a person applies for an allotment, he can put down his name three times.

**Iain Smith:** So people can be on the waiting list for several different allotments.

**Ian Woolard:** The maximum number of allotments for which a person can apply is three. However, a person might apply for only one. That is the reason for the difference in the figures.

**Iain Smith:** That is helpful.

The council's presentation contains useful information. The map at appendix 3 shows that allotments are bunched in certain parts of the city, whereas there are no allotments in other parts of the city. Does that reflect demand or are there areas of untapped demand? People might think that they do not have the option of having an allotment, so they do not consider it.

**Herbert Coutts:** Dr Cuthbert knows about the siting of allotments. Some research was undertaken during the second world war, when there were a huge number of sites. After the war, allotment sites were closed and used for park purposes. The plots that are outlined on the map are an historical residue. The situation is partly a result of history and partly a result of demand.

We have been looking at places that could be used for new allotment developments were it possible to identify sites. We must know how far people have to travel to reach their allotments. I am now paraphrasing Dr Cuthbert, but most people have to travel only two miles to their allotments.

**Iain Smith:** Will the council, as part of its strategy, consider whether there should be additional allotment sites in other parts of the city?

**Herbert Coutts:** Yes.

**Dr Cuthbert:** There is a direct correlation between site use and traditional tenemental housing structure. In the 1960s, there was expansion of public sector housing and private sector housing; the houses, by and large, carried gardens with them. The traditional, tenemental, inner-city areas are the areas where, historically, the largest number of allotments were sited. Such areas continue to have the greatest demand for allotments.

**Mr Harding:** I note from your submission that there will be a material increase in capital investment over the next few years of £250,000. Do you consider that there has been under-provision in allotment services in the past few years?

**Herbert Coutts:** As Ian Woolard said, there has been provision but, as the committee will know only too well, local authorities have had to face major cuts until recently and, against that background, only limited provision could be made for allotments.

We want to improve the quality of the allotments. That is why the council decided to include more provision in its rolling capital programme. The council is certainly sympathetic to the needs of allotment holders. Future funding will inevitably be influenced by the results of the allotment strategy on which we are working. The recommendations

of the strategy will obviously have funding implications, and we will try to build a future allotments capital programme on those recommendations. Of course, allotment services would be competing with other services for resources.

**Mr Harding:** Is £250,000 over the next two years a firm commitment?

**Herbert Coutts:** The commitment is as firm as any local authority capital programme can be. The council has a three-year rolling programme and the commitment is contained within that programme. By and large, the council has been good at honouring the provision that it makes within rolling programmes. However, the local authority in Edinburgh, like any other form of government, could suddenly have great demand placed upon it for which there is no provision. That would affect other matters for which provision had been made.

**Mr Harding:** An investment of £250,000 is substantial; it works out at about £250 per plot. What do you propose to use the money for? What upgrading are you talking about?

**Herbert Coutts:** The programme is a mixture of upgrading and, we hope—if we can achieve it—acquisition. We have our eyes on one specific allotment site, which is privately owned at present. The site has been handed from one developer to another in the hope that it could be developed for housing, but the local plan protects it from such development. We have had discussions with a succession of developers about acquiring that site. The provision to which you referred—the figure is £200,000—is for a mixture of upgrading and acquisition. If we cannot pursue the acquisition, we will use the funds for upgrading.

Once again, based on the results of Michael Cuthbert's survey, there are clear indications of what allotment holders would like us to do with the existing sites. We hold much public land in Edinburgh and we will be looking at the gap areas and considering the possibility of using existing land held by the council and, possibly, creating allotment sites within some parks. Such action could always be turned round in the future. Allotments are sustainable and if, in 50 years' time, there is no demand for them, our successors can do what our predecessors did after the second world war and return the sites to parks. There are several possibilities.

**Mr Harding:** Thank you for clarifying the matter. Your report did not mention anything about acquisitions. It mentioned only upgrading, which is why I asked the question.

**Herbert Coutts:** I understand that. We are a little sensitive about giving details of the site in question.

**Dr Jackson:** I thank the witnesses for the information that they have given us so far. It is very useful.

I wish to follow on from Keith Harding's question. The survey has identified the rubbish collection service as one issue to take forward. The survey that is included in your submission mentions composting, which is an important aspect of recycling. How do you plan to proceed with recycling in general? How do you intend to deal with wider matters such as educating people about recycling and other issues?

**Dr Cuthbert:** One of the recommendations that we have discussed concerns extending the allotment service to include educational courses. We have proposed some ways of introducing such a scheme. Mr Coutts mentioned lottery funding in England and Wales; the green spaces programme specifically makes itemised provision for that kind of work on allotments. There is a glaring absence of such provision in Scotland, which is a pity.

**Dr Jackson:** How much recycling—in particular, composting—happens at the moment? Perhaps you have not reached that stage in your survey.

**Dr Cuthbert:** Of the 71 per cent who responded to the survey, 83 per cent regularly composted waste on their plots, and only 14 per cent did not. Only a third used chemicals, and 64 per cent did not. Furthermore, I was really surprised to find that a majority—60 per cent—said that they had organic gardens.

**The Convener:** As far as my allotment is concerned, I am the original recycler. I do not throw anything out, because I can always stick a plant in it.

What are your links with the private sites in Edinburgh? Do you service them at all and, if so, do you cost that?

**Ian Woolard:** To be honest, I do not have much information on the private sites. I am really in contact only with the Wisp at Portobello, where I speak fairly regularly with the secretary. I am not too sure about the rest of the sites.

**The Convener:** So you have very few links with those sites.

**Ian Woolard:** Yes.

**Ms White:** We have discussed the cultural links with the city sites, which are on high-value land. In your excellent submission, you mention developing new allotment sites in peripheral estates such as housing schemes, which is a good social inclusion proposal. How would you go about implementing that idea? Would you conduct a survey on the available vacant land in the suggested areas, and then find out whether the people in those areas had any great interest in

allotments?

I was interested in the fact that 41 per cent of the people who use the allotments are women. What about issues such as travel and security? Allotments can sometimes look like shanty towns and the way that they are laid out can make them quite insecure places. Although I think that the idea is excellent, I would be interested to hear how you plan to develop and advertise it.

**Herbert Coutts:** As part of the work on the survey, we are surveying available land in the city, including housing estates and similar areas. As for how we plan to develop those proposals, we are in active discussion with the council's planning division. In addition, the list of members of the working party that is overseeing Michael Cuthbert's work includes planning officers, because I am very interested in planning gain.

Edinburgh has a dynamic economy at the moment, and there is huge pressure for development. The council, in partnership with others, has major proposals for the south-east wedge and the waterfront. In our discussions with the planning department, we are trying to propose allotment provision as a possible planning gain in addition to the other kinds of planning gains that you get when developers are keen to hang carrots in front of local authorities to give them the necessary planning permissions.

Our plans for development will be heavily influenced by the gaps that are apparent on the map and which will be further brought out by Michael Cuthbert's survey work.

**The Convener:** Are the waiting lists based on a first-come, first-served system, or is weighting given to black and ethnic minority people, disabled people and single parents?

15:00

**Ian Woolard:** The waiting lists are based on a first-come, first-served system. In some sections of the city—particularly in the south of the city—the waiting lists are quite long and people have to wait for an average of five years before they get the chance of an allotment. That is why I am allocating quite a few half plots. If I did not allocate half plots on some of the large sites for which there are waiting lists, the waiting time might go up to seven or eight years.

**The Convener:** Is there any need to review the legislation on allotments?

**Dr Cuthbert:** Background information from SAGS indicates that there is concern about closures in Scotland, especially in Edinburgh, as illustrated by the recent judgment on the Telferton and Craigentiny allotments. However, the disposal of sites by the public sector is not a

significant problem.

If a national approach is taken, perhaps it should be policy based, as Herbert Coutts said. There ought to be more support for proactive healthy eating programmes in social inclusion areas. It is not just about saying to people, "Come along, get an allotment and grow healthy vegetables." I am sure that the health boards and the health promotion bodies would be willing to take a partnership approach, possibly through the active promotion of the programmes and probably connected to nutrition classes. Such initiatives might require some national shoulder behind them.

**Herbert Coutts:** Whether we have legislation or national guidelines, the point is often forgotten that allotments are important for healthy living. We would like that point to be given greater emphasis. We hope that the Local Government Committee recognises the fact that allotments make an important contribution to healthy living. Much of the evidence that Michael Cuthbert has gathered underlines the point that resources are going into the encouragement of healthy lifestyles through, for example, the healthy living centres. Why should an allotment site not be regarded as a healthy living centre? The problem is that we tend to think in boxes.

Michael Cuthbert recently reminded me that the Allotments (Scotland) Act 1892 requires local authorities that provide allotments to ensure that they are self-financing by charging appropriate rentals. In these days of sky-high land prices in city centres, if we were to charge allotment holders rentals that made the exercise self-financing, there would be a riot and we would hear a lot about it. The 1892 act is still on the statute book and the committee might want to address that issue if it is to consider amending the legislation.

**The Convener:** As there are no more questions, I thank the witnesses for their presentation and for the submission that we received before the meeting, which was useful, as was the submission from the previous witnesses.

Comrades, Peter Sandwell is the business development officer at Dundee City Council's leisure and parks department. As you have been sitting in the public gallery, you know the drill: you may speak for a few minutes and then I will open up the meeting to questions.

**Peter Sandwell (Dundee City Council):** It was interesting that the witnesses from the City of Edinburgh Council, both in their submission and in their oral evidence, stressed that their problem is with waiting lists. For Dundee City Council, the problem is slightly different, because there is a general lack of demand for some allotments.

At the same time as we were asked to address

the committee, we were approached by some allotment holders from the Dundee Federation of Allotment Gardeners Association, who explained some of their problems. About a week ago, about the same time as we sent our written submission, we had a meeting with the allotment holders at which Councillor Farquhar, our convener, expressed the council's support for allotments and talked about the need to work together. We are considering the issue of lack of demand and how allotment holders can access funding, but we are certainly not as developed as the City of Edinburgh Council.

Our submission states that the Dundee open space strategy, which was published last year, identified the need for an allotment strategy. We are addressing that need. Although we have not done any surveys, we have spoken to various allotment people as well as to people in the healthy Dundee nutrition groups to see whether they are interested.

The submission outlines that Dundee City Council manages its own allotments and that there are a number of devolved and private allotments. Probably the greatest difficulty concerns our own allotments because, about 20 or more years ago, many of the council's allotments were transferred to devolved management. The sites that were retained by the council tend to be smaller allotments and tend not to have services. They also tend to be isolated. About 10 to 15 years ago, we provided huts and glasshouses for one allotment site, which is now regarded as the most successful.

The submission also outlines how we have recently split some allotments because they were too big and were not being used. There has been a definite improvement in the take-up of allotments and a consequent reduction in vandalism in the area.

We are considering developing a strategy and are obtaining copies of a guide on good practice. We will certainly find the City of Edinburgh Council strategy useful in developing our own strategy.

**The Convener:** You mentioned the differences between council management and devolved management. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each form of management? Which is the better way forward? The City of Edinburgh Council seems to have much more control over its allotments.

**Peter Sandwell:** The advantage of having our own allotments is that if problems arise, such as people not cultivating their plots, we can take direct action. However, in allotments with devolved management, a lot of management responsibility is taken away from us. The people at devolved allotments do all their own letting, terminations and

collections of rent, whereas we have to employ people in our booking section for the allotments that we manage. With a devolved allotment, it is just a matter of our collecting the lease annually.

**The Convener:** Your submission was the only one that mentioned an increase in the cost of removing rubbish because of the landfill tax. Is that giving you a problem?

**Peter Sandwell:** Yes. The cost for each allotment is a problem. I was interested in what the witnesses from the City of Edinburgh Council said about recycling and composting. I have no figures, but I am sure that many people compost. However, a lot of waste is generated by allotments, because of persistent weeds and other things that cannot be composted. We provide a skip at each allotment, which we empty regularly. I do not know whether Dundee is different from other places, but since we have had to pay landfill tax on that waste, our costs have risen substantially.

**The Convener:** I do not think that you can be very different from anybody else, as skips are very much part of allotments, especially at this time of the year.

**Iain Smith:** You say that there is not a huge demand for your allotments, but what have you done to advertise them? How do you market the allotments?

**Peter Sandwell:** To be honest, we have not advertised allotments. However, after looking back and discovering that certain things have not been done, we acknowledge that we now have an opportunity to advertise. Certainly, the Dundee Federation of Gardens and Allotments advertises. For example, every year, it takes a stand at the Dundee flower show, which attracts about 18,000 people, including many local people. We would like to go down the avenue of promoting allotments more than we have done. In the council, it has been suggested that when we advertise our other facilities in the local paper, we could include some kind of banner to advertise allotments. We feel that not advertising has been a weakness and we will address that.

**Iain Smith:** Have you asked the existing ploholders why there is no demand? Is it to do with the quality of services, the location of the allotments or their size, which you have suggested may be a problem in some places?

**Peter Sandwell:** We have not done a detailed survey, but we have regular contact with the Dundee Federation of Gardens and Allotments and we also respond to inquiries from plot holders. I suspect that lack of security is a problem in some areas where there is no sense of community among the plot holders and the allotments are subjected to vandalism. The federation has told us

that three main sites around the base of Dundee Law have been especially difficult to let. They have become fairly full of pernicious weeds. People take on the plots, but do not have the commitment to make them work.

Last week, we discussed the possibility of training people in the use of equipment that will be important in any strategy that we develop. Obviously, with powered equipment, we would need to ensure that we adhere to health and safety regulations. However, training may just be a matter of showing people how to dig properly.

If any plots in the council's own allotments become untended, we cultivate them. However, couch grass and other weeds soon come back.

**The Convener:** If the allotment is not worked?

**Peter Sandwell:** Yes.

**Dr Jackson:** Could you send us a copy of the open space strategy that you have developed?

**Peter Sandwell:** Certainly.

**Dr Jackson:** On page 3 of your submission, you list seven things that you will target in your policy. Do you think that it would be useful to have a central co-ordinator within the council?

**Peter Sandwell:** At the moment, the department is restructuring. Although there will not be a person specifically to cover allotments, the overall responsibility for parks, allotments and cemeteries will become clearer. There will be more ownership and I imagine that responsibility for allotments will be taken on as part of that, but, at the moment, there are no plans for an allotment officer.

15:15

**Dr Jackson:** I have a second question about devolved site management. What support or funding does the council give to devolved sites?

**Peter Sandwell:** For a number of years, no capital funding has been put into allotments. They get revenue for skips and fencing repairs, but they have no funding other than that. We are aware that they are looking for funding for new allotment huts. One of the private allotments—which the council has little to do with—has recently applied for a grant for huts from the awards for all programmes. We have had discussions with the devolved allotment holders.

**Dr Jackson:** Were the allotment holders whom you met recently from the directly managed sites, the devolved sites or both?

**Peter Sandwell:** They were primarily representatives of the Dundee Federation of Gardens and Allotments. They represented members from all three types of site, but mainly the devolved and private sites. There was also a

representative from another allotment that is not part of that federation.

**The Convener:** Your submission mentioned community gardens—something that I did not pick up from anyone else. Do you have community gardens?

**Peter Sandwell:** It was interesting listening to Dr Cuthbert, who spoke to us a few years ago. At one time there was quite a bit of discussion about various redevelopments and community gardens. We do not have any community gardens at the moment, but we have committed ourselves to supporting any initiative that is proposed.

**The Convener:** So would you wait for the public to come to you?

**Peter Sandwell:** Yes, although a proposal could be a joint initiative with the council. The council officers could identify a need.

I would like to correct part of my submission. The first paragraph on page 3 mentions all the allotments “to the north” of the Kingsway—that should read “to the south”. I apologise for that. That is an important point because the majority of the bigger housing schemes in Dundee are north of the Kingsway. The existing allotments are in the more traditional tenement areas and around Dundee Law. Any strategy should address that.

**Ms White:** You mentioned that there are three different types of site management: council-run, private and devolved. You have also told us that representatives of each type of site management meet as a group. Does your submission say how successful each type is? Is there a vast difference in how successful each type is at attracting people? When you produce your strategy documents, will you have consulted members of the other two groups and taken their ideas on board? When will the strategy document be published?

**Peter Sandwell:** The document is not published yet. We are at the start of the process and we do not have a date for publication. We will consult widely within the federation. The idea of a survey across the allotments sector is useful and I am glad that that has been brought to our attention.

I know little about private allotments in general, but I know about one that is very successful. It is run by Clepington Working Men's Association in the shadow of Tannadice stadium. I do not know whether there is a hierarchy and people move from one of our allotments to a devolved one and then—if they are really good—to a private one. That allotment has 81 plots; I am not aware of any vacancies. All allotments have many irregular types of building and that one is no different, but it is a busy and active site. We must investigate why that is the case at those sites and not at ours.



**The Convener:** Thank you very much. When we read your submission, we all felt that there was hope. You are listening to others and will take on board the good points from the exercise. Good luck with what you have to do. It will be interesting to see the report when it is published.

I should say that it is Michael McMahon's birthday today—happy birthday, Michael. I have been told that he has reached the age at which he can be an allotment holder.

**Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab):** It looks like it.

## Committee Newsletter

**The Convener:** The next item is the committee newsletter. Members have received a briefing paper, which lays out some of our proposals and ideas. The purpose of the newsletter will be to get more information out to our constituent groups about what has gone on, what is going on and what will go on in the Local Government Committee. The newsletter will be sent out to groups in hard copy and it will be published on the website. I will take the committee through the briefing paper paragraph by paragraph. Members should call out if there is something that they do not understand or that they want to change.

The paragraph on introduction and purpose is fair enough and I think the one on the background is clear. Do members want to suggest any changes to the paragraph on the purpose of the newsletter? As I said, the aim is to get more information out to people about what we are doing and to co-ordinate our activities.

Do members have points about the paragraph on the target audience?

**Mr McMahon:** It is stated that the target audience includes

“officers and members of the 32 councils”.

Do we send the newsletter direct to each individual, or do we send it to the council and ask the council to distribute it to the target audience?

**The Convener:** We will probably send it to the council.

**Mr Harding:** I do not know how practical this is, but I would prefer community councils to be in the primary rather than secondary audience. They, too, are elected bodies and all their work falls around local councils.

**The Convener:** The newsletters will all go out at the same time. Arrangements have been made to send them direct to community councils. I do not see community councils as secondary. Should we add any other bodies to the list?

**Iain Smith:** We should add the principal trade unions with local government connections.

**The Convener:** I had not thought of them—that is a good point.

We are considering publishing four editions of the newsletter a year. Is that acceptable?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** I have already said that the newsletter will go out in both hard copy and electronic copy. As far as I know, that will be done through the Stationery Office.

**Mr McMahon:** Could the newsletter be made available in different languages? If we send it out to community groups, their primary language might not be English. Is there provision for it being published in an alternative language if that is requested?

**The Convener:** We are considering the possibility of the newsletter going out in English and Gaelic. We have asked Eugene Windsor to find out what happens with other publications. We must identify our audience. If there is a demand for it to be produced in another language, we could certainly consider that. Eugene will explore the matter over the next couple of weeks and we will get it sorted out. I cannot think of an example where that demand might exist, but Michael McMahon may well be right and in that case we will have the newsletter translated, if that is possible.

**Mr McMahon:** Other documents that the Parliament publishes are provided in another language when that is requested, if they are not published in another language as of right. Will that provision be made available in relation to the newsletter?

**The Convener:** Yes. Eugene Windsor will check the matter out. I have asked him to speak to people such as the clerks of the Equal Opportunities Committee.

The briefing paper states that the newsletter will not provide information about the views of individuals or party groups but will be a non-partisan, non-political document. Examples are given of what will be included in it.

I do not want people to find that there is a mass of words and nothing else. We must consider the format to ensure that it is punchy and gets the appropriate information over.

On the production arrangements, because the newsletter is intended to be non-political and non-partisan, it should be possible for the contents to be signed off by the convener, the deputy convener and the clerk. I guess that if we make a terrible mistake, members will let us know.

**Ms White:** Will we see a draft?

**The Convener:** No. We did not intend to produce a draft for the committee, but if members want us to produce one we could do so.

**Mr Harding:** I would rather attack you after the event, convener.

**The Convener:** Can we accept the proposals on the newsletter?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

15:26

*Meeting continued in private until 16:02.*

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