

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

8th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday
17 May 2023

PE2007: Increase allotment provision for all and entitle Universal Credit claimants to a free plot

Petitioner	Carol Ann Weston
Petition summary	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to increase allotment provision so current waiting lists are fulfilled and all Universal Credit claimants are offered a free plot at their nearest allotment site.
Webpage	https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2007

Introduction

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 28 March 2023.
2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.
4. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 53 signatures have been received on this petition.
5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered. A response has been received from the Scottish Government and is included at **Annexe C** of this paper.

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE2007: Increase allotment provision for all and entitle Universal Credit claimants to a free plot

Petitioner

Carol Ann Weston

Date lodged

28 March 2023

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to increase allotment provision so current waiting lists are fulfilled and all Universal Credit claimants are offered a free plot at their nearest allotment site.

Previous action

Back in 2021 I emailed my Westminster MP who told me this was a matter for the Scottish Parliament. I have been communicating with my local council, by both telephone and email, and I have suggested that they negotiate with the owner of the field adjacent to my local allotment site to increase the area to include more plots. Despite my best efforts to explain the current food poverty issue they remain seemingly unconcerned and several months of emails to my MSP have generated no response either.

Background information

People are waiting for years on local government waiting lists just to get a humble allotment plot.

The current inflation crisis is making it difficult for some people to afford a balanced diet, particularly the rural poor on Universal Credit who can rarely afford bus fares, and as a result have to survive on the limited range of groceries available at inflated prices in small village shops.

Universal Credit is less than half of the state pension and is regarded as

the harshest and most brutal benefit to ever have existed, and is a known suicide risk factor.

A free allotment plot is the most progressive and logical next step up from the current undignified food bank mentality and has the potential to improve the nutrition, choice and supply of fresh food to some of the most vulnerable people in society.

'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.' Lao Tzu.

Annexe B

The logo for SPICe, featuring the text 'SPICe' in white on a purple background.The logo for The Information Centre, featuring the text 'The Information Centre' and 'An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh' in white on a dark blue background.

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition PE2007: Increase allotment provision for all and entitle Universal Credit claimants to a free plot, lodged by Carol Ann Weston

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

Allotment policy, legislation and parliamentary activity

Legislation on allotments is contained in Part 9 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. [Guidance](#) to local authorities was issued in 2019. The legislation includes duties on local authorities to take reasonable steps to:

- Provide sufficient allotments to keep waiting lists at no more than half the number of allotments, and
- Ensure that someone doesn't wait more than five years for an allotment (the guidance notes that this comes into effect 8 years after local authorities first make regulations under s.115 of the Act)

The Act is [currently being reviewed](#) by the Scottish Government, although the focus is mainly on community ownership and may not include too much consideration of allotments.

Part 9 of the Act was considered [by the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee](#) in 2022 as part of its post-legislative scrutiny of the 2015 Act. The Committee found considerable unmet demand for allotments and made a number of [recommendations](#). The report noted that:

“The Committee appreciates that local authorities do not have enough resources to simply create large numbers of new allotments to meet all demand.” (para 79)

The [Minister responded in January 2023](#) and the Committee [took evidence from the Minister](#) later that month. The Minister said that although the Scottish Government had a clear role

“The vast majority of the responsibilities lie with local authorities, which are best placed to make decisions based on their local demography, geography and resource. I want the Scottish Government to be a helpful broker of progress on that, but I do not want to impinge on local decision making.”

While emphasising that the situation differs between different local authorities, she acknowledged that:

“Waiting lists are long and growing; as you have identified, the availability of land remains a problem.”

A raised bed rather than a tennis court sized allotment?

During its inquiry, the Committee heard about the health and social benefits of community growing; but also heard from a number of witnesses that a full-size, traditional allotment plot (up to 250 sq meters, or the size of a doubles tennis court) is not for everyone. In reality, one or two raised beds in a community garden could be sufficient for many part-time or beginner growers:

“Community gardens take many different forms, ranging from small raised beds on available land through to community gardens and orchards. For some people they provide an introduction to growing, helping to build their confidence and perhaps move on to seek their own allotment space. For communities they bring people together, reducing isolation and strengthening ties. Sometimes they are an additional source of food for people most in need.”

Lou Evans from the [Community Growing Forum](#) told the Committee about the importance of this broad approach to community growing:

“We need a whole load of different models... Although allotments are one form... 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.”

The availability of land is a major barrier to increased allotment/community garden provision in many areas (for example East Lothian, Edinburgh and Aberdeen). However, the Committee visited some innovative community projects in Glasgow and Edinburgh where brownfield sites and other urban spaces are being successfully utilised (see for example the work of [Urban Roots](#)). There are [hundreds of community gardens](#) across Scotland, often run and organised by community and third sector organisations.

Community gardens are not covered by the requirements of the Community Empowerment Act, except the need for Food Growing Strategies to identify and increase the availability of land suitable for community growing.

Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022

This broad ranging Act requires local authorities, the Scottish Government and others to produce plans and establish a “Food Commission”. These are yet to be produced.

Universal Credit

The petitioner asks for all those on Universal Credit to be given an allotment, referring to the “harsh and brutal” benefit regime. In January 2023 there were 478,766 people in Scotland in receipt of Universal Credit. Universal Credit is gradually replacing six ‘legacy’ benefits. In the three years 2017-20, there were, on average around one million people in Scotland getting Universal Credit or an equivalent benefit ([HBAI on StatXplore](#))

Universal Credit is for people of working age who are unemployed, in low-paid work or unable to work due to ill-health or caring responsibilities.

It does not include people of pension age. The main benefit for low income pensioners is Pension Credit, with 127,080 people in receipt in Scotland in August 2022.

Research published in 2021 ([Understanding Society](#)) estimated that 63,674 people experienced psychological distress between 2013 and 2016 due to the introduction of Universal Credit. A [large scale study](#) of the mental health impact of Universal Credit is currently ongoing, led by Glasgow and Newcastle Universities, and due to complete in 2025.

Food Banks

The petitioner refers to “the undignified food bank mentality.” The Scottish Government consulted on a draft plan to end the need for food banks. The [consultation analysis](#) was published in October 2022, noting that “a few respondents” suggested increased resourcing for community gardens and allotments. Similar issues arose in the 2022 [consultation on Local Food for Everyone](#), - the ‘local food strategy’.

Camilla Kidner and Greig Liddell

Senior Researchers

March 2023

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

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Annexe C

Scottish Government submission of 21 March 2023

PE2007/A: Increase allotment provision for all and entitle Universal Credit claimants to a free plot

Allotments and community growing spaces play an important role in many ways, including use of local produce, promoting healthy eating, reducing isolation and encouraging nature and outdoor activities.

Part 9 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 (the 'Act') consolidates, updates and simplifies the previous statutory regime regarding allotments by bringing it together in a single piece of legislation. As set out in Act, allotments and their provision are the responsibility of local authorities.

The Act places a number of duties on local authorities and it is ultimately up to the local authorities themselves to decide how best to carry out the duties placed on them by Part 9. We believe it is right for the Scottish Government to provide local authorities with the autonomy to decide themselves how best to carry out those duties, appreciating that a one size fits all approach does not always work.

We are committed to working with local authorities where we can to support, without impinging on their responsibilities.

The Scottish Government recognises the ongoing challenges faced by local governments in relation to allotment waiting lists. Events over the last few years such as Brexit related disruption, the Covid-19 pandemic and the current cost of living crisis have brought allotments and access to food growing sites to the forefront of people's minds. We are aware this has resulted in a sharp rise in the number of people requesting an allotment site from their local authority and has put additional strain on already lengthy waiting lists.

In accordance with section 121 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, local authorities report annually on provisions of allotments in their areas. Reports are available from each local authority

online. The Scottish Government do not hold historic data on allotment provision.

We encourage local authorities to look at innovative ways to reduce allotment waiting lists, for example, by using their local food growing strategies as a mechanism to investigate and promote alternative growing models such as community garden projects. Highlighting alternatives available may encourage and allow local residents to grow in sites out with the traditional setting of allotments.

Since 2012, the Scottish Government has allocated more than £1.6 million to directly support and increase the land that is available for community growing. This funding includes:

- The Community Growing Fund, a grant scheme for the years 2019/2020 and 2020/21, provided a total of £80,000 to local community growing groups public bodies and third sector organisations.
- Nearly £579,000 has been allocated to various growing groups in Scotland, including Trellis, Social Farms and Gardens and GrowGreen Scotland, between 2016 to 2023,
- Funding to the Green Action Trust (previously Central Scotland Green Network) to allocate grants to projects that aim to increase the amount of land for community growing. Since 2012 around £1.14 million has been provided, supporting a huge number of community growing groups.

Universal credit is reserved to the UK Government and is administered by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). As Universal Credit is a reserved matter, over which Scottish Ministers have no powers, unfortunately we cannot intervene.

There is no provision for the Scottish Government to provide an allotment to Universal Credit recipients in Scotland. However Universal Credit is a passporting benefit to the following benefits, managed and paid by the Scottish Government:

- legal aid
- court exemption fees
- free school lunches
- free NHS dental treatment
- NHS patient travel costs

- NHS optical vouchers
- individual learning accounts
- education maintenance allowance
- early learning and childcare entitlement

People in receipt of Universal Credit who have a child who meets the relevant age criteria, may also be eligible for our five family payments – which includes [Scottish Child Payment](#), the three [Best Start Grants and Best Start Foods](#).