

Visit to Exchange information and Discuss Issues arising for Allotments as a result of the Community Empowerment Act

On May 17th we hosted a visit from a group of Scottish Government officials with responsibility for implementing various aspects of the Community Empowerment Act. The visit was supported the Scottish Community Alliance which paid for travel and subsistence under its Community Learning Exchange initiative (<http://www.scottishcommunityalliance.org.uk/community-learning-exchange/>)

The day was planned so that we spent time at three of Glasgow's allotment sites: Hamiltonhill, Springburn Gardens and South Western with a different focus for discussion at each site.

The sun was out and there were plenty of people working their plots so we had some lively discussions about the value and function of allotments as we toured round each of the sites..

Hamilton Hill Allotments

Hamilton Hill is a site on local government owned land. It has an active committee with several community plots and is next to a local nursery. There was an emphasis here on health and well-being and the contribution that allotments can make both in this regard and in terms of social inclusion. We discussed the support needed for associations on local authority sites to move over to becoming more independent organisations and how this affects people who volunteer to be on committees. We also discussed what these kind of changes in organisational structure will mean in terms of creating systems to support local democracy.

Springburn Gardens Allotments

This is a set of allotments where the land is owned by the allotment association which is a company limited by guarantee. Springburn's committee has been concerned with re-generating the site after it had largely become derelict. There are a significant proportion of plots being used by people from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. It has a couple of community plots and has restored its old community hut. Here the topic for discussion was the contribution allotments can make to the urban environment. Springburn is trying to convert roughly 5 acres of its land into a nature reserve. Funding, partnerships and the complexities of the process of bidding for grants etc. was an issue. We also discussed funding at the local level and the democratic mechanisms for the distribution of local funds.

South Western Allotments

South Western is an independently run site where the ownership of the land is not entirely clear. The committee is relatively new and has been actively working to increase engagement both amongst the ploholders and with the local community. They are in the process of developing a

community garden area to improve the access and involvement of various community groups. They have been encouraging visits from local schools and other organisations to become involved in food growing and gardening. We discussed the process of moving from being an inwardly focused organisation to one that was outwardly connected and the nature of the practical and cultural changes that this required.

Our visitors were impressed by the range of contributions that the sites were making to their local communities and the environment. They particularly remarked on the comments by ploholders about the value of their plots in terms of relieving stress and allowing them to join in with a small community with interests in a common form of activity. In their feedback they noted that allotments were about much more than growing food (which was what they expected the visits to be about). The sites they visited and the ploholders they talked to testified that they also served as places that supported social cohesion, personal well-being, recycling and biodiversity.

Those attending:

Alasdair McKinlay (Local Government and Communities Directorate), Aileen Bearhop and Pamela Blyth (Good Food Nation Team Food, Drink and Trade Division)

GAF group: Jenny Reeves (Springburn), Iain Sutherland (Mansewood), Judy Wilkinson (Kelvinside), Miranda Whitmarsh (plot-holder's daughter Kelvinside), Liz McKinlay (New Victoria Gardens), Andy Forrester (Westthorn), Katie McKillop (Hamiltonhill),

We met with Charlotte Bryant + 3 others at Hamiltonhill; Margaret Scott and David Beveridge at Springburn; Marie MacFarlane and Celia Bonner at South Western and Ian McCracken (Merrylee) plus talking to ploholders on site.