

Y Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, Amgylchedd a Materion Gwledig | Climate Change,
Environment and Rural Affairs Committee
Ymchwiliad Rhandiroedd | Allotments Inquiry
Ymateb gan : Ffermydd a Gerddi Cymdeithasol
Evidence from : Social Farms and Gardens

Social Farms & Gardens exists to support and develop community-based food and fibre production in all its forms including community gardens, allotments, community/city farms, community forests and woodlands, Care Farms and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects. We represent around 1,000 member organisations across the UK, 390 of which are in Wales.

It is a new organisation created as a result of the merger between the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG), and Care Farming UK. The two joined together in April 2018 to better support and represent the farmers, gardeners and growers who run life-changing projects in our urban and rural communities.

Both former organisations and have a long track record of supporting projects in their specific areas. FCFCG was established in 1980 to support community farms and gardens across the UK. It has offices in Cardiff, Bangor, Bristol, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It has helped the movement grow from a handful of projects at that time of its establishment to the robust, diverse and dynamic sector it is today. Care Farming UK promotes and supports care farms in the UK, along with thousands of grass roots projects that have helped millions of people.

In the UK there are some 5000 community gardens, 200 city and school farms, 100 CSA projects. Between them they employ 550 people, engage with thousands of volunteers and attract over three million visitors each.

In Wales, the only UK country to have a specific community growing strategy, there are about 450 community gardens & school gardens, 2 city farms, 6 care farms and 9 CSA projects with a further 14 in various stages of development. Social Farms & Gardens manages the Tyfu Fyny Project in Wales, funded through the Rural Development Plans for Wales (2014 – 2020), which supports community-based farming and gardening projects.

Social Farms & Gardens also manages the Community Land Advisory Service in Wales (CLAS Cymru) funded by the Landscape and Outdoor Recreation Branch in Welsh Government. This service provides guidance for groups to access green spaces (for growing or other community led green space uses). We provide support on all aspects of accessing land, land agreements and planning issues. CLAS can particularly help in establishing permitted development rights for allotment holders, having a chartered town planner coordinating the programme enables us to apply existing planning rights and to look realistically at how the planning system could be more supportive to allotment holders and community growers. Further planning guidance for LA's can be found in Chapter 4 of the Traditional Allotments and Community Led Gardening Projects Guidance – March 2016. A link to this guidance is provided below.

Our response

Our response is submitted on behalf of our members, and we believe is representative of the wider community food growing sector.

1. The Welsh Government's strategic approach

We believe that sufficient consultation and guidance documents have been produced in the last 9 years to support Welsh Government in identifying the actions and the steps necessary to support allotments and community growing in Wales.

In 2015, Social Farms & Gardens, (under its previous name of Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens), were commissioned to undertake work on behalf of Welsh Government to create a guidance document for "Traditional Allotments and Community Led Gardening Projects" which was published in March 2016. This document currently features under Business, Economy and Innovation section of the website and then under subject area 'Food and Drink' on www.beta.gov.wales and covers different models of allotment and community growing, the law, planning guidance for local authorities and groups, advice for public and private landowners, and finding and funding land. This guidance and specific sections are referred to in other parts of our response as relevant.

<https://beta.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-05/allotments-and-community-led-gardening-guidance.pdf>.

We would advise this guidance is reviewed thoroughly as part of our response as it comprehensively covers all areas addressed in the Sustainability Committee's Allotment Provision in Wales report of July 2010. Landscape and Outdoor Recreation Branch of Welsh Government support this area of the website and fund the Community Land Advisory Service Cymru (as referred to above). Consultation with the relevant civil servants in this branch is strongly advised.

As an organisation we also contributed to the Welsh Government's Community Grown Food Action Plan (July 2010) and the Welsh Rural Observatory document on Community Grown Food in Wales (2012), which both outlined a number of actions including mapping, funding streams available to develop community sites, improving access to land to help address issues with land availability, and the need for better skills training and networking between community projects.

We believe that these documents outline a clear strategic direction, supported by a number of pieces of legislation including:

- The **Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015** which strives for a prosperous, resilient, healthier Wales, stipulating that Local Authorities should give due consideration for the sustainability benefits of community growing.
- The **Environment Act 2016** stipulating that Local Authorities should develop allotment strategies and that the development of Area Statements by Natural Resources Wales will help coordinate joined up working to build the resilience of our ecosystems and enhance the benefits of they provide us.
- **Planning Wales Act 2015** works to ensure the right development in the right place, which is more important than ever in this time of asset valuation and disposal by Local Authorities.

2. The approach taken by local authorities across Wales

As an organisation, we are aware of some local authorities (LA's) who have developed allotment strategies in recent years. In particular, Conwy's allotment strategy 2011 – 2016 clearly outlines research and consultation has been done to map allotment provision and demand. Allotment holders have also been consulted and surveyed. Our Development Worker for this area has seen that Conwy's strategy has been delivered and appears to be having a positive effect on community growing sites.

The extent to which other LA's are taking forward their allotment strategies seems to vary vastly. All seem to have strategies in place but it's not clear to what extent these have been implemented. In addition, responsibility for allotments appear to sit under different departments in different LA's.

We acknowledge that there is very good practice out there and we would like to see every LA have a similar approach, working together to share best practice to provide consistency and best practice.

We have previously acknowledged the work done by Cardiff Council, Wrexham County Borough Council and Conwy Borough Council to promote best practice. Refer to Chapter 5 of the Traditional Allotments and Community Led Gardening Projects Consultation.

3. How we can maximise the health, community and environmental benefits of allotments and community growing

You can maximise the health, community and environmental benefits of allotments and community growing by:

Allotments

1. Consistently mapping allotment provision and demand across all LA's in Wales, ensuring each LA is carrying out the process in the same way. This needs to take into account that some plots are unusable for various reasons and waiting lists do not accurately reflect demand as some people may be put off from going on a long waiting list.
2. Mapping potential growing spaces or allocating sites in the local development plan for each local authority area - for either more allotment plots or for community growing. This could be privately owned land, Housing Association Land, National Trust, Council owned land etc. Refer to Chapter 6 of the 2016 Guidance document for advice for public and private landowners working with community growing groups.
3. Encouraging and facilitating the allocation of certain areas of allotment sites to wildlife
4. Producing an allotment guide for allotment holders, such as the guide produced by Cardiff Council in July 2012. This could be customised with local contacts and information and be designed to manage the expectations of a new plot holder to reduce early drop off rates. The guide can be found here - <https://www.cardiff.gov.uk/ENG/resident/Leisure-parks-and-culture/Allotments/Documents/Cardiff%20Allotment%20Guide.pdf>

Community Led Growing Projects

5. Ensuring consistency of charging for community led growing projects on council run allotment sites across Wales. We note that different charges apply to different allotment sites depending on location and facilities available. However, it is largely unrealistic to apply an allotment plot charging structure to community groups. We know of one example in Cardiff where a group is being charged full rent for the plots they have use of, totalling £700pa. This is despite some users being eligible for a reduction in rent were they to occupy a standard allotment plot. In most cases, charges at this level would be prohibitive to a community group using that land to grow.
6. Carrying out consultations or working with an external organisation (such as SF&G) to identify areas where there is a high demand for community led projects.
7. Devising a universal process across Wales for getting community groups access to land. The Community Land Advisory Service Cymru is well placed to support this. In our experience the process can prove relatively straightforward or incredibly difficult depending on which Local Authority is involved. We have examples of some groups that have come across such lengthy processes and numerous barriers that it has resulted in them giving up the idea altogether (RCT). In other areas, the LA has been very supportive and accommodating of community growing projects (VOG). There are even inconsistencies in advice given by different members of staff in different departments within the same council.
8. Training for LA staff (across all departments) to avoid inconsistencies as mentioned above and to establish a standard procedure to ensure the service provided to community groups is efficient and the group feels they are well advised and supported. This training could encompass the huge benefits of community led growing and how this links into:
 - Health & wellbeing
 - Education
 - Recreation
 - Community cohesion
 - Reduction of social isolation
 - Reduction of antisocial behaviour
 - Food security and sustainability
 - Improving green infrastructure and biodiversity

We would draw your attention in particular to, Chapter 5 of the aforementioned guidance, which discusses the responsibilities, duties and powers of local authorities. This chapter also outlines the benefits of community growing projects for local authorities in more detail

9. Demonstration by LA's that work in this area has been done by the creation of a 'roadmap' giving comprehensive guidance for community groups and individuals who are interested in either allotments or community led growing sites. Ideally this would be consistent across LA's giving details on how an allotment plot could be obtained or how to access land for growing.

10. SF&G currently has a programme funded by the Landscape and Outdoor Recreation Branch in Welsh Government called the Community Land Advisory Service (CLAS Cymru). This service provides guidance for groups to access green spaces (for growing or other community use). We can offer assistance in all aspects of accessing land, land agreements and planning issues. CLAS can particularly help in establishing permitted development rights in certain situations, such as community projects based on allotment sites. Further planning guidance for LA's can be found in Chapter 4 of the 2016 Guidance

As an organisation, Social Farms & Gardens have the experience, connections and knowledge to be able to effectively work with local authorities to maximise the use of allotments and other existing and potential growing spaces. We have Development Workers in place who cover the whole of Wales. In addition, we have also worked with Welsh Government on various policies and consultations in the past in a range of areas.

Should funding be available, we are ideally placed to carry out a mapping and provision exercise for allotments and community led growing projects to establish availability of land and demand. We are able to work with and co-ordinate local authorities to ensure efficient and consistent approaches are in place for all aspects covered in this consultation.