

Member Champion: Community Food Growing

Annual Report 2014/2015

I believe that my year as a Member Champion has been an excellent demonstration of the Council working co-operatively.

Throughout the year I have worked with Council officers and members of the public along with other politicians, private enterprise and charities. I have very much seen my role as one of “information conduit”, allowing the passage of information and best practice both into and out of the Council. To that end I have met with all but three of the allotment sites in Cardiff and a good handful of the most active community gardens. Here is what I have learnt:-

1. That much of the work of Council officers in supporting community gardens goes unrecognised in the public domain and even within the Council itself.
2. That the work expected of the Allotment Officer is much more than one person can do.
3. Community gardens flourish more where the density of population is highest and almost always exist because of the immense enthusiasm of a single person/group.
4. Allotment sites and community gardens rarely speak with each other or share best practice.
5. The standard of allotment sites in terms of infrastructure, services and cultivation quality is generally poor across Cardiff.
6. That the best allotment sites in Cardiff are the ones which are locally managed and which have very active and enthusiastic committees.
7. That on commencement of my role the relations between site secretaries of allotments and Council officers were at a very low point, and occasionally close to hostile.
8. Other authorities across Wales and the UK give more autonomy to allotment sites than we currently do in Cardiff, and this autonomy would be welcomed by allotment sites.

Throughout the year as Member Champion I have been helped by numerous people but especially by the officers in the Parks Service, specifically Jon Maidment, Rosie James, Ian Prothero and Celia Hart. The staff have embraced me as a positive force for change despite what I perceived was an initial hesitation at how to take my boundless enthusiasm. I cannot overstate just how grateful I am to the Parks Service, without whom I would have achieved very little in my year as Champion. With the help of staff and allotment site secretaries I have taken on the role of Chairman of the site secretary quarterly meetings and successfully rebuilt bridges between the two parties. I have encouraged closer involvement of site secretaries with the Council's decision-making process.

This expanded involvement of site secretaries' views has delivered a new local management agreement which better reflects the relationship between the Council and allotment site, though I expect further improvements will be made to it in its interim year. This involvement by site secretaries has also delivered a new way of

inspecting plots which should streamline the process of releasing further land for cultivation across the city.

During the year I had the ambition to foster closer ties between allotment sites and community gardens so that knowledge, innovation and passion for growing may be shared across the city. Unfortunately I was unable to focus as much energy in this direction as I would have liked, and so going forward it will be a goal of mine to develop these ties. My vision is for a co-ordination of growing across the city, led by growers and spanning allotments, community gardens, businesses and private gardens.

Such co-ordination has a great potential to not only “greenify” the city further but potentially to link underused edible produce to those people who need it most. Work is already underway towards this, with some of our parkland and grass verges being left to grow wild. But I think we should go further. We should create opportunities for local communities to use underused public land locally for growing. Projects such as that at Grange Pavilion in the Grangetown Ward lead the way on this sort of project, as does the work of ACE in Ely Ward. Both have my continued support.

There is no doubt that gardening and growing your own is good for you, and the most valuable lesson I have learnt in this year as Champion is just how undervalued this activity is. Welsh Government has consulted on growing and (hopefully) intends to bring in to law changes to make it easier for communities and councils to release land for growing. Here in Cardiff we are already releasing excess land to communities for growing, and we should explore this further. It is my belief that we should give more autonomy to allotment sites over their own running and back this up with adequate resources. Lessons must be learned from past experiences in this area, but that should not impede the authority from moving forward with planned devolution of powers to allotment sites.

In this report I hope I have been able to demonstrate the potential of Member Champions for this organisation. The City of Cardiff Council should recognise the importance of Member Champions, and when resources allow it should direct further efforts to the role. Scrutiny services have a role to play in conducting research to support Member Champions, and this could work alongside the role played by scrutiny committees.

Were it not for the officers in Parks I could not have achieved half of what I did this year. I believe this is a powerful example of a service that is willing to explore new ways of working, and one which can be scrutinised as to why its role in supporting Member Champions was so effective. I would not presume to know all of the reasons but I can pick out in particular a few keys points:-

1. The Operational Manager heading up the service was very happy to speak with me on the phone at all times. He kept me briefed on developments in the service, and invited me to meetings pertinent to my role.
2. Officers were welcoming and where possible accommodated my requests for information which I needed for my role.
3. Officers quickly accepted my role and (I believe) began to see me as part of the team.

To close, it would be remiss of me to not mention my heartfelt gratitude to the members of Cardiff Allotment Holders Association (CAHA) who have supported me

in my role. They have had immense patience in working with the slow wheels of local government, and have done so in good spirits. Without volunteers our allotments simply would not function and we ignore their efforts at our peril.

Diolch

**Councillor/Cynghorydd Gareth Holden
(July 2015)**

Fy Nghyf / My Ref: NRS/RM/GH/09.07.15

Dyddiad / Date: 15 July 2015

Councillor Gareth Holden
City of Cardiff Council
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Atlantic Wharf
Cardiff
CF10 4UW



Dear Councillor Holden

ECONOMY AND CULTURE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 9 JULY 2015

Allotment Strategy Interim Review

Following the Economy & Culture Scrutiny Committee's consideration of the Allotment Strategy Interim Review, I would like to thank you for attending the meeting and answering the Committee's questions alongside the Cabinet Member and officers.

We wish to congratulate you on the work you have undertaken to improve allotments in Cardiff, acting as a facilitator between the Council and allotment tenants, and helping to break down barriers that have historically existed between these parties. During the meeting the Chairman of Cardiff Allotment Holders' Association commented that allotment holders now feel involved and engaged in the running and future plans for allotments, and we recognise this is very much down to the energy and enthusiasm you have dedicated in your role as Member Champion for Community Food Growing.

We hope that this partnership approach and the delivery of the actions set out in the Allotment Strategy Interim Plan 2014-2017 Action Plan will help develop a well managed, sustainable and accessible allotment service for Cardiff

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rod McKerlich', with a horizontal line underneath.

Councillor Rod McKerlich
Chairperson, Economy and Culture Scrutiny Committee