

STONEHAVEN STARTER SITE

Report to the Climate Challenge Fund, March 2011

Today, Saturday 5 March 2011, 35 allotment plots were marked out at the Baird Park site in Stonehaven! This day marks the beginning of the end of a long, mostly patient, and mostly optimistic, struggle by officers and members of the Stonehaven Allotment Association (SAA) to create allotments for the community. There will be hard work ahead, but the joy of the work being under our control and the vision of crops to come will be reward enough.

Plots looking south



Looking north



This report, primarily for the Climate Challenge Fund, covers the history of the Association from its first meetings to this point; a description of the project and our progress in reaching the point of marking out plots; a summary of benefits achieved for tenants, the Association and the community; an assessment of members' feelings and plans for their own plots with reference to the original stated aims of the project; and a brief 'wish list' of what we would like to achieve in the coming years.

I Brief History of the Stonehaven Allotment Association

Way back in 2006 a small group of residents of Stonehaven, all with 'green' inclinations and all with families to feed, decided to get together to persuade the local authority to provide allotments - the first in the town for many years. Aberdeenshire Council was encouraging when approached and suggested that the group of individuals should form a properly constituted association and seek out suitable land for an allotment site. The first was fairly easily achieved but the second was a far harder nut to crack.

Getting started

A constitution was adopted at an AGM in March 2006 and officers were appointed. It was agreed that since the association did not have charitable aims it should not seek charitable status. Membership was open to all those over 16 living or working in the town, individuals or groups. By the middle of 2007 there were about 20 members, meeting regularly once a month. At that time they sought a site with enough space for 30-40 full-size allotments to make the project self-sufficient financially. There was considerable emphasis on the 'green' side of the venture and a stated aim was for allotments to be managed organically as far as possible.

The search for land

During the next couple of years a huge amount of effort, by both officers and members, was put into seeking out suitable land. Stonehaven is a compact seaside town of around 12,000 inhabitants around a bay some 16 miles south of Aberdeen. In recent years there has been considerable development around the edges of the town where farming has given way to housing. Formal leisure uses predominate on the flatter area near the sea and the land rises quite steeply once out of the immediate town centre. There was no obvious site available for allotments, so all avenues had to be explored. The Council suggested a small plot of parkland in the town - not large enough for the 30-40 plots envisioned and said to be prone to flooding. This was rejected. A promising offer by a landowner was withdrawn until a decision was made about the route of a major Aberdeen relief road.

A renewed push

By the time of the AGM in March 2008 active membership had dwindled to around 14, the decline possibly due to the lack of effective progress towards securing a site. The same officers were re-elected but with a strong remit to raise membership numbers, to enhance the profile of the association around the town and to increase the level of the bank account. By these means it was hoped to influence the local authority and the business community in the town to give stronger support to the request for land.

By the end of the year (March 2009) there were 48 members and some £2,000 in the bank.

Compromise

2009-10 brought another downturn in membership. For many members, whose principle aim was to get digging, the prospect of another season with no land for allotments was disheartening. Monthly meetings continued between April and October 2009 with speakers at most meetings to add interest and information for members. Despite this, attendance at meetings dropped off sharply and many members resigned.

The committee, nevertheless, continued its work doggedly behind the scenes, and at the end the 2009 season it was agreed that a compromise was needed. Members agreed that Aberdeenshire Council should be asked if the offer of the site in Baird Park, originally rejected, was still open. It was! This was a milestone!

A site at last

The proposed site, to the west side of Baird Park near the entrance to the town and alongside a river, would be sufficient for 35 starter allotments, each around 90 sq.m. All went well, and the

A green field site. Summer 2010



Stonehaven and District Community Council agreed to promote a planning application on behalf of the SAA for change of use of the land from parkland to allotments. A successful grant application to The Climate Challenge Fund, subject to planning approval, would provide for a small shed, a water collection and storage system and compost bin on each plot, and also a central pathway and vehicular delivery area. This would mean that when starter plots were vacated by tenants moving on to full-size plots they would be fully furnished for new tenants, and would be visually more attractive than *ad hoc* building.

II Project Description: Stonehaven Starter Site

On 9 April 2010 the Climate Challenge Fund approved a grant of £17,464 to enable the Stonehaven Allotment Association to undertake development work on a site near the entrance to the town for 35 Starter Allotment Plots. The grant was to cover the cost of ground works (ploughing and rotavating), a small shed with water collection system, a water butt and compost bin for each plot. The grant included professional installation of pathways and shed bases. Fencing would be done by Aberdeenshire Council with a contribution to the cost made by the Association and members' own fundraising would enable the purchase of sundries and incidental expenses. The main CCF grant was later supplemented by a grant of £10,000 from Awards for All to cover installation of mains water, rabbit-proofing of the perimeter fence and planning and legal costs.

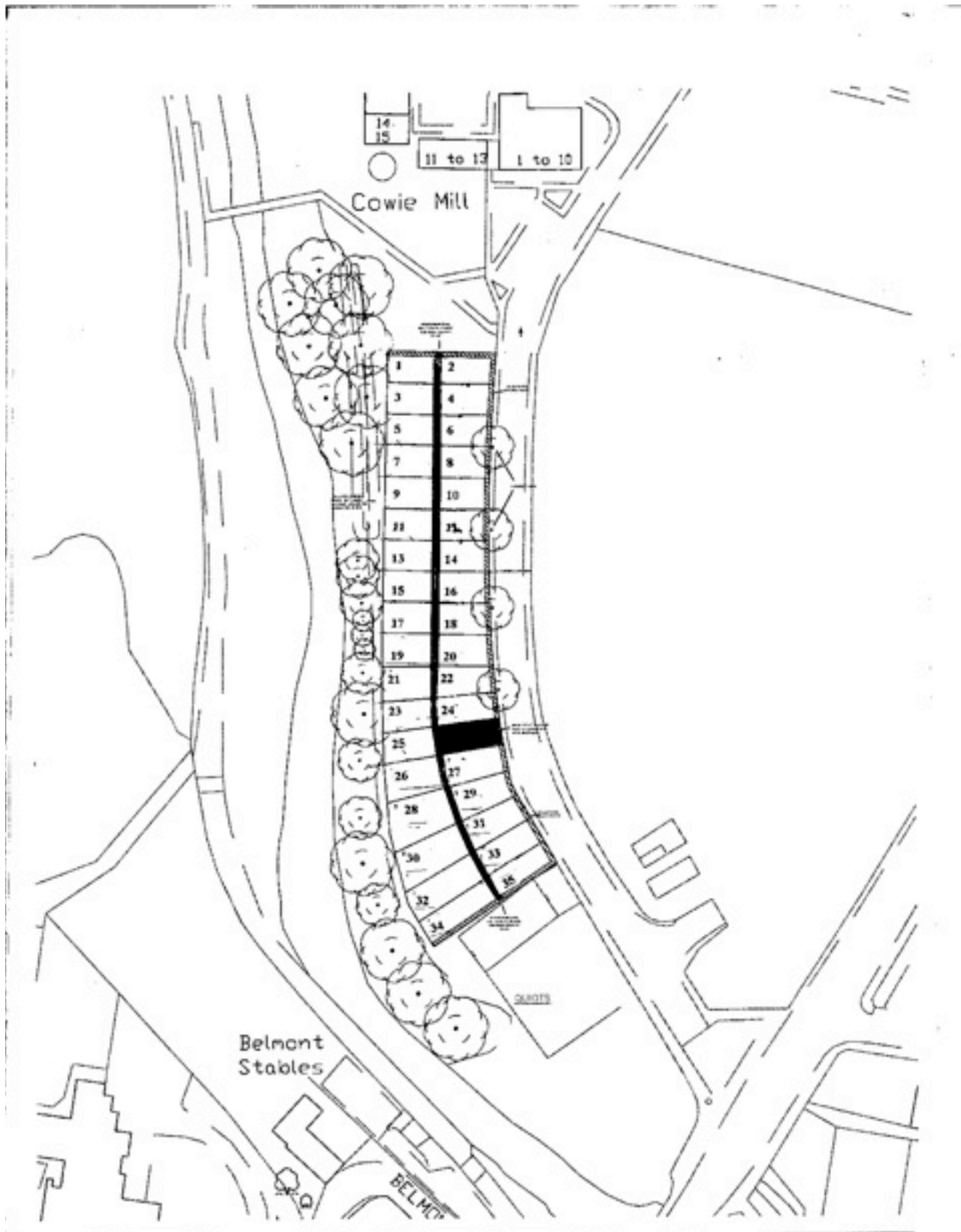
The application envisaged three phases for the project: provision of 35 starter plots, possibly including some which would try out intensive gardening and raised beds; raising awareness of 'growing your own'; and third, an evaluation phase. The last phase, of evaluation, was scheduled to take place in January and February this year, towards the end of a full season of gardening after gaining planning permission in April 2010 and allowing three months for the development work. The timing, sadly, completely failed to take account of the negotiations and administrative tasks which would complete the planning process and transfer the land for use by the Allotment Association. In practice, we have barely reached the end of the first phase of the Project as originally set out. However, as the sections below describe, we have made very significant gains in many ways so that the process of the Project has been most worthwhile and time well spent. The grant from the Climate Challenge Fund has been spent almost exactly as envisaged, despite the delays,

Progress: The paperwork and management of the development phase

Planning approval was granted in June 2010 and a senior member of the Stonehaven and District Community Council member took on the role of responsible agent for the conditions imposed by the planning committee. At the regular meeting in July one of the SAA members offered to take on the role of Project Manager for the scheme, much to the delight and relief of all members. We also heard that the 'flooding' was largely a result of problems with the land drains, a situation which the council has undertaken to put right. At an early meeting the Council undertook to erect a chain link fence around the site (with an SAA contribution of £5000) and to plant and maintain a natural hedge (hornbeam, holly, hazel, brambles etc.) around the three sides of the fence within the park and visible from the main road into Stonehaven. The fourth site boundary is visible only from the Cowie Burn.

After that point it was a waiting game whilst the Council dealt with planning conditions, for which various documents were required, and prepared the Lease, without which the Association was forbidden to begin any work whatsoever on the land. However, the time lapse served to enable the scrutiny of original specifications and estimates for work and materials and refinement to keep all within budget.

Baird Park Site Plan



Aberdeenshire COUNCIL		Property	01753 820000	01753 820000
			01753 820000	01753 820000
Part of the Transportation and Infrastructure Series				

Progress: Development Work

The Project Manager set out a detailed schedule which went before members at their regular meeting in August 2010 and was amended in January 2011 once the Lease had been signed. All the original estimates for groundworks, sheds and other items (made in July 2009) had to be thoroughly revised but contracts were agreed by mid-February 2011. In November, a Council contractor had replaced the land drains across the site. A kerb was dropped in early February to allow access from the road to the site, but just as groundwork was about to begin in earnest progress was again delayed both by heavy rainfall and by the arrival of a large group of travellers on to the road alongside the site. The travellers both impeded access to the site and intimidated potential tenants as well as making the prospect of leaving their equipment overnight somewhat risky for contractors.

The travellers were finally moved to a more appropriate site at the beginning of March and since then work has moved on apace: the fence has been erected, water pipes have been laid, sheds, composters and rainwater gear has been delivered and plots have been marked out with posts and recycled rope from a local crab-fisherman.

The Project Manager has estimated that tenants will be able to begin gardening in earnest in the early weeks of April 2011.

Progress: Tenancy and Management of the Allotments

A one-off Allocation Meeting was held immediately before the AGM on 2 February 2011. Fortunately the number of prospective tenants (individuals or households) exactly matched the plots on offer and all went smoothly. A number of people remained members of the Association but had declined a plot this year, usually for personal reasons. Since that date a few more people have moved out of the area so some plots have become available for new members.

We have been fortunate, as a serendipitous by-product of the fund-raising Grand Auction held in October 2010, to have attracted a donation from a local well-wisher to pay for plot charges, for ten years, for the primary schools in the area. At present three of the four local primaries have taken up the offer. A local mental health support charity has also taken a plot, assisted by the minister of a local church.

At the AGM in February 2011, a plot charge of £45 for 2011 was agreed and all tenants have now signed Tenancy Agreements (approved by members in September 2010) and paid their fee for the year.

The role of Site Supervisor is being undertaken by one of the Association members, supported by the existing Committee of five.

Progress: Money

The Climate Challenge Fund grant of over £17,000 was sufficient to pay for the main items of the project as envisaged when the application was put together in 2009/10. The items were: ploughing the whole plot; groundwork to provide a central pathway; bases for sheds; the sheds themselves with rainwater collection system and a composter for each plot. CCF also allowed us to claim VAT since the Association is not registered for this.

As the project progressed it became apparent that there would be significantly more to pay for. A grant was secured from Awards for All to cover our contribution to the cost of the perimeter fence, erected by Aberdeenshire Council's Landscape Services; dropping a kerb for the main access gate; installing mains water with taps on the site; legal costs and wire and posts for marking out plots.

Still to be paid for: the main fence needed to be rabbit-proofed, various fees had to be paid and the cost of sundries such as tamper-proof combination locks for gates continued to rise.

The Association had been raising funds itself by taking stalls at a number of community events, including the annual Feein' Market, the MRI Harbour Festival, the Thomson Rally and several car boot sales. These helped to publicise the Association and its objectives, including introducing the attractions of 'grow your own' to the general public and was an opportunity for members to join in the fun.

Fundraising at the Feein' Market, June 2010



The main fundraising event in 2010 was a Grand Auction, organised by one of the Committee members, with our auctioneer from the Stonehaven & District Community Council. This event raised over £6,000 from a major donation, the auction and a raffle. This event attracted support from local and national politicians and from Jim McColl, presenter of BBC1 Scotland's Beechgrove Garden, who 'said a few words' and made us laugh. Thanks to the efforts of the organiser, the event had excellent media coverage from local newspapers and the local radio station, and this served to promote the idea of allotment gardening and its associated benefits as well as publicising the event itself.

Our final grant was £1,000 from Aberdeenshire Council's Top Up Fund, to bolster the funds for previously unanticipated expenses.

The total cost of setting up the Baird Park allotment will be in the region of £35,000.

III Project Achievements

The dates originally estimated for the development project, and use of the Climate Challenge Fund grant, were a start in April 2010 with completion by June 2010. In practice, development work began on site in January 2011 and will end by the beginning of April. The timescale of the work which was funded by CCF and others was pretty accurate but the whole project was delayed by about nine months.

The project fell behind at every stage, partly because of inaccurate estimates about how long each stage of the dealings with Aberdeenshire Council would take, but also because of wet and freezing weather in December 2010 and early 2011. The final hold-up was because, in early February, a group of travellers chose the road alongside the allotment site to park about 20 caravans and other vehicles. The Association is currently seeking to join other affected community groups,

STONEHAVEN ALLOTMENT ASSOCIATION

headed by the Stonehaven and District Community Council, to work with the Council and the Police to ensure that travellers are directed to a more suitable site than ones in the centre of the town.

The planning conditions were satisfied and the final paperwork, our Lease from the Council for the land, was completed at the end of November 2010, having taken nearly eleven months from first submission of planning documents. Almost immediately the weather turned wintery and the site became frozen, precluding the ploughing which was the first task on the schedule drawn up by our Project Manager.

The Gardening Year! The story in pictures.

Snow, January 2011



Digging the land drain, Autumn 2010



Breaking ground, February 2011



Dropping the kerb for the main gate, February 2011



STONEHAVEN ALLOTMENT ASSOCIATION

Installing a mains water supply, March 2011



The fence, main gate and a shed delivery, March 2011



Sheds and rainwater goods, March 2011



Sheds awaiting erection, looking south, March 2011



The rabbit fence, installed by a Community Service team



Formal outcomes

The proposal envisaged three intended outcomes:

1. Increase in the production and consumption of 'grow your own' fruit and vegetables.
2. Raise awareness of the benefits of 'grow your own'.
3. Increase in the amount being composted.

During the 2009 and 2010 seasons, guests were invited to regular meetings; members heard from speakers on organic vegetable growing, security issues, garden birds and other wildlife and bee-keeping. So far, this season we have had a session on seeds and tips for growing vegetables under local conditions and ideas from members include soil structure and chemistry and suitable crops for the soil, food preparation and cooking from a local restaurateur, growing skills.

The intention was to conduct a survey at the end of the first season on the allotments. Clearly this is not now possible so a small number of tenants were asked to comment on their plans for the season, what benefits they perceived from 'grow your own' and what their composting plans were. We should bear in mind that each plot comes equipped with a composter and shed with rainwater collection system.

Tenants' Aspirations

The section below summarises responses from some of our tenants to questions about the project's intended outcomes.

Planting plans include:

'After ground preparation and greenhouse construction I plan to plant some fruit bushes and, because they are slow to mature, some asparagus. I will also make a raised bed for vegetables for general eating.'

"I intend to start off this season with the standard mix of potatoes and root vegetables with some salads and some peas, beans and cabbage. I have a greenhouse at home for tomatoes and cucumbers. This year will be an experiment to see what works and what doesn't and I see my choice of crops maturing over the years. Next year I would like to try to grow some pumpkins and other non-standard crops".

'I love trees and will be growing willow as a crop from short cuttings of about 15 varieties. The crop will be useful for bartering with fellow tenants for a range of vegetables. I will also have celeriac, rhubarb, raspberries and a range of herbs. Tomatoes will be in hanging baskets from my shed.'

A number of people mentioned the value of their allotment to their children - 'my five-year-old twins are very excited at the idea of a "vegetable garden"'.

'Our plans for the first year are to lay out the plot and plant potatoes and onions (which cannot be grown in our small garden because of disease) as well as a variety of brassicas for the winter. By the end of the year I hope to have a bed system established. We are keen to plant raspberry canes, summer and late-fruiting, and some currants.'

Perceived benefits include:

- Being able to grow organic vegetables and eat them as fresh as possible to retain their goodness and taste.
- Being able to grow vegetables that are not readily available in our shops but grow perfectly well locally, such as beetroot and runner beans.
- Reducing the carbon footprint of our food - food miles and packaging.
- Keeping fit and enjoying the outdoors.
- Being part of a like-minded community in the allotments, learning from each other, the community spirit.

- *I would like my children to be able to identify the taste of fresh vegetables and differentiate between those and processed food.*
- *General satisfaction in eating something home-grown and also in seeing primary schools and community groups getting pleasure from their own achievements.*
- *On the allotment I can try various varieties of each vegetable and then grow the ones I like best.*

Composting plans

'I will compost all green and brown materials from the plot and home. I believe fervently in putting back as much as possible of what comes out. I will also use any spare composting capacity by volunteering to compost other tenants' material.'

'Not something I have done before, having no garden, but I understand the basic principles and I am very keen to learn from other people at the site.'

'I hope that I can avoid adding anything to my plot apart from composted material and, if necessary, manure.'

'The plot will have a dedicated area for all allotment waste, and compost will be spread over beds in rotation to improve the quality and fertility of the soil.'

Benefits for tenants

Tenants have already had the opportunity to hear from experts about a number of subjects relevant to allotment gardening. On site, experience and knowledge vary from 'totally new to the game' to 'experienced and confident'. The fact that the soil is friable and the park grass has been ploughed in has made it much easier to work than for many new allotment sites.

The presence of three schools looking after their own allotments will promote a collaborative and learning atmosphere across the site.

The Association allocated plots according to individual preference, but the site is fairly compact so that any tenant who wishes to have some advice or help can easily go and seek help from someone on another plot. In addition, the Site Manager has a plot in the centre of the site and will be able to operate an informal information service, both for technical information and for such things as seed and plant swaps.

Benefits for the Association

Members now know each other well as a group and are able to absorb new members easily. We can take decisions which genuinely reflect the whole group rather than just a small controlling cohort. It is also possible to contemplate revising the Constitution and the Tenancy Agreement to make both much simpler and less cumbersome, reflecting the general cohesion and ethos of common sense and tolerance of the Association. As a body, members have been markedly patient throughout the waiting period and this has been a useful asset in navigating the procedures of the Council and other bodies whose pace of decision-making has sometimes been a source of frustration.

As an Association we have come to respect the helpfulness, effectiveness and persistence of the members of the Stonehaven & District Community Council, particularly the officer responsible for compliance with the planning conditions, and initial distrust and antagonism for the local authority has matured into an high degree of collaboration on both sides.

These changes have come about because, together, we have been able to achieve, in the new allotments in a highly visible site, a desirable community asset. The Council have provided land and

have granted planning permission for a totally new venture; the Community Council has been actively supportive and helpful from the first and the Stonehaven Allotment Association has kept its eye on the ball and has sought, and been granted, funds from sources not open to either of the other bodies as well as engaging in serious fund-raising through its own efforts.

Benefits for the community

During the development phase of the Starter Site Project the Association has had a lot of money to spend. We have taken pains to ensure that as much as possible has been spent locally, from the groundwork contractor to the number plaques on the sheds. Members have also been able to contribute their skills. We have been rewarded by being offered excellent prices for hardware and services and long-term discounts from several businesses.

Permanent allotments in a prominent part of the town will be seen as an asset to the town. Already many folk make a point of stopping for a chat whilst walking their dogs. We hope that, in due course surplus produce might be available 'at the gate'.

Over the past year or two, stimulated by the fundraising auction last year, we have had serious and effective support from local and national politicians and we are at pains to keep them informed of the fortunes of the Association and progress with the development of the allotments. We thank them for their support.

IV The Future

The Committee has already agreed that the immediate next stage is to pursue the original objective of acquiring land for 30-40 full-size allotment plots within the Stonehaven area. The Chair is in the process of re-contacting all local landowners and relevant bodies to renew the search. The regular newsletter which goes to a range of supporters, including donors, national and local politicians and the media, will continue. The Association will hold an Open Day towards the end of the growing season which will enable all interested members of the local community to see what had been achieved and offer support. We will be seeking to maintain our profile and recruit new members at events during the year.

A Lasting Legacy

The Lease for the Baird Park land from the Council is for 25 years in the first instance, so our allotments are here to stay.

Members of the Stonehaven Allotments Association have shown themselves, by their patience and tenacity, to be willing to work long and hard to achieve their aims and these aims, constitutionally and ethically, are to encourage the management of the allotments in a sustainable, organic and wild-life friendly way and also to provide opportunities for the public to learn about allotments and their cultivation.

Although we do not yet have quantitative measures for the success of the Stonehaven Starter Site Project we believe that all the right elements are in place for a very successful 25 years or more.