

Oatlands Leisure Gardens – a Case History

Background

The Oatlands Leisure Gardens have been in their current site, Elmfoot Street near the Gorbals Glasgow, since the late 1980s. Funding was received from the EU to replace a previous site that had been lost to regeneration many years before.

Since their inception, the gardens have been worked and enjoyed by local residents. There are 20 plots including two school plots with disabled access, raised beds and a polytunnel. The site is worked by over 30 individuals and community groups, including Blackfriars Primary School, Richmond Park Primary School, the Simon Community, Oatlands Residents' Association, the Transition Group and the Carr-Gorm Group.

However, in 2005 Glasgow City Council Department of Regeneration Services and Gladedale Property Developers agreed a 75 year lease on the land for regeneration. The developers paid £1 for the whole Oatlands site, agreeing to spend £2M to upgrade the recreational provision, landscape framework and appearance of Richmond Park. This was part of a package of local improvements including a major road diversion, community centre, school improvements and subsidy for social rented housing. As part of the same facilities agreement, the allotments were to be moved in 2008 to a smaller site adjoining Richmond Park School, reducing the number of plots from 20 to 13. The growing interest in allotments was not recognized and it was felt that the existing site was larger than justified by demand. This assumption has clearly been disproved. The existing site is full with a waiting list even though it is in the middle of a rubble strewn desert.

Initial Problems and resolution:

Last February, the allotment site suffered major damage due to the storms and heavy rain. However, everyone rallied round and carried out repairs on the greenhouses and everything was back on track by the Spring. Unfortunately, in June a spate of vandalism started and huts were being burned on a weekly basis. The metal storage area for tools and the clubhouse were razed to the ground. By this time, the fire brigade had been called out on five separate occasions and it was obvious that the vandalism was not being carried out by kids. Before the clubhouse fire, boltcutters had been used to cut the fencing and large industrial tools such as a rotovator and a chainsaw had been stolen, requiring transport for these tools to be removed from the site. The fire had taken hold very quickly so that the fire brigade were too late to save the clubhouse and it was likely that petrol had been used. By July, there were few panes of glass left in any of the greenhouses, five sheds have been razed to the ground, the storage area and clubhouse burnt out, everyone had lost their tools and the polytunnel was ripped apart.

As part of the regeneration the surrounding houses have been demolished so the site is in a wasteland, completely isolated apart from the adjoining derelict church scheduled for renovation as a community centre. By late 2008 the development had been halted due to the economic situation. Of the 9 development phases, phase 1 is almost complete, phase 2 half finished. The new allotment site is scheduled for phase 3 and on present estimates it will be created at the end of 2009 allowing the plot-holders to move into it in the spring of 2010. Gladedale have agreed that they can stay on original site until the new site is complete

In the Autumn because of the vandalism and demoralisation of the plot-holders Oatlands Allotments Association together with the Glasgow Allotments Forum requested meetings with officers from Regeneration and Development Services (DRS), Land and Environmental Services (LES), local Councillors and the Director of Gladedale the development company.

The plot-holders requested a new security fence and CCTV cameras to provide security at the existing site until the new site is available. By December the negotiations had reached an impasse.

The existing site had been managed by DRS but the lease was terminated at the beginning of the regeneration project 'to allow for the transfer to the new site'. Gladedale refused to accept that they had landlord's responsibility but suggested that they 'would favourably consider erecting a fence round the Allotments, subject to a cost check on the Council's estimate, and also subject to being paid for the work at the beginning of the new financial year (2009/10).' This was offered in January 2009 so they were offering to put up the fence immediately to be re-imbursed in April. Although the new site will be under their control, LES do not have responsibility for the existing site so replied "The projected cost for the supply for this fence line will use most of the projected improvement and maintenance budget for all the allotments managed by Glasgow City Council for financial year 2009/10. .. we would be severely criticised for utilising the majority of a budget not only on one site but on a site not under our control.' They offered ' Reimbursement to Gladedale only takes place when fence line is available for re-use (ie when allotments have moved to their new location); LES only reimburse Gladedale for usable fencing sections; and the value of the usable fence line will be based on second hand prices at the time of use.' Oatlands Allotment Association and Glasgow Allotments Forum appealed to the Director of DRS, Steve Inch. He accepted the urgency of the situation and took responsibility for the fence which was finally erected at the end of April 2009.

In the meantime CCTV cameras were installed and the vandalism ceased. Unfortunately some plot-holders had been completely disheartened, could not see things improving in the future and did not return. They were mostly the more vulnerable - couples with young children, women sharing a plot and an older couple who just found it all too much. However others felt they needed to garden and that they would protect what they feel is a valuable part of their lives. They joined together to raise awareness in the local community. Since the turn of the year, people from the local area as well as local community groups have applied for plots so the site is now full with a waiting list.

Recurrence of Vandalism and Requests

Unfortunately on Friday April 24th the Council removed the CCTV camera without consulting the plot-holders. Chaos started immediately. One hut was burned down on Friday night - the fire brigade couldn't get access through the new gate, one greenhouse completely shattered, the school greenhouse doors were smashed, one plot-holder's potatoes drowned with the contents of 3 water butts, seedlings ruined with weed-killer, other greenhouses with panes of glass smashed and the communal poly-tunnel polythene ripped. One of the oldest plot-holders arrived around 9.30am on Saturday morning April 25th and was challenged by two teenage boys carrying hammers. Fortunately, he was unhurt but left badly shaken. The vandals accessed the site using the fencing (with cordons of the rubble from the tenements) as ladders. Finally on the Saturday afternoon, when the allotments were busy, two teenage boys (around 13) starting throwing stones (from the rubble) over the fence.

As a result of these incidents the plot-holders are requesting that

- *the builders rubble that has been used to attack plotholders and the builders fencing are removed immediately*
- *The CCTV and display notices warning that the camera is in use are re-instated immediately*
- *The safety of the community groups and school children is ensured.*
- *The burnt out clubhouse/storage area and toilets are replaced*
- *The plans for the regeneration area are reviewed and the current site retained to accommodate the waiting list.*
- *The new site is opened as quickly as possible*

This request was sent to the DRS on April 27th. A subsequent series of emails contained the following points:

Suggestions from DRS and response from the Allotments Association and from the Allotments Officer.

• Social inclusion

A representative from DRS believes that the problem arose because *“Although I have absolutely no idea whether local youths are to blame, this is a possibility and could stem from a certain degree of resentment that exists locally against the allotments – and this derives from the fact that very few of the allotment holders, if any, live in Oatlands ... One idea to combat this sort of thing, as advocated by allotment organisations elsewhere in the UK, is the idea of ‘social inclusion’, that is trying to get local people more involved and therefore less likely to destroy the property and hard work of people they know.”*

The Allotment Association strongly disagree with this assertion that the plot-holders are not local. To define what is local to an area in the middle of demolished tenements is difficult. In fact 16 of the plot- holders live in the Oatlands/Hutchesontown area, two others have had their allotments since they lived in the area and the other six all have local postcodes. The Allotments officer supports this saying *“Oatlands Allotments already have strong links with the local community.”*

• Open Days

The DRS representative suggested *“Holding open days, perhaps one in the present allotments, one in the new allotments when complete, and then on a regular basis”* . The Allotments Association was planning to do this and looking forward to celebrating the plots. However Glasgow City Council have very strict guidelines on the procedure and safety regulations for Open Days and at the moment the site does not fulfill the safety requirements. The Allotments Officer states *“The condition of the surrounding area and the threat of being subjected to missile throwing from outside the allotments, would pose a problem for any planned open days, visits etc”* .

• Leaflet drop

Further thoughts from the DRS are *“Specifically inviting local people to become involved, perhaps through a leaflet drop (or inclusion in a local newsletter, now under consideration)”* The Allotment Officer agrees that *“A leaflet drop or letter from DRS to local residents who are already in new properties in Oatlands, explaining that the allotments are part of the community and will continue to be in the regeneration programme, may help to develop more local support for the allotments.”*

But as the Allotments Association responds *“ if we do a door to door survey or leaflet drop, what do you suggest we do when people show an interest in having an allotment? The existing site already has a waiting list and there is a rapid increase in demand for allotments across the city”*

Suggestions from the Allotments Association

• Removal of demolition work and rubbish

The Allotments Officer says *“The problem at the moment is that those groups already involved feel that the allotments do not provide a safe environment for their client groups.”*

The DRS representative responds that *“the Council has formally contacted Gladedale to request removal/recontouring of the adjacent demolition debris as soon as possible – it would appear that their sub-contractors are seriously in default as far as timescales are concerned.”*

Surely the first requirement when there is a halt in the regeneration process should be that the sites are made as safe and vandal proof as possible. If the developers are seriously in default what penalties are the Council applying?

• Regenerate of Church as a community centre.

The Allotments Association believe that Gladedale has a responsibility to institute some of their plans for community sites immediately to help in the present regeneration crisis. *“The community is not thriving. We are surrounded by waste ground.”*

Work has started on the road connecting the M74 to the East End that passes next to the existing

allotment site. On 23rd February 2009 the Evening Times reported that *“Gladedale has been given £3million of Glasgow council cash after running out of money for a part of the East End regeneration. Gladedale Homes, formerly Bett Homes, won a massive contract in 2004 to build more than 1200 homes in the Oatlands area. Part of the agreement was the company would carry out realignment of Rutherglen Road as part of the East End Regeneration Route. However, with only part of the work done, Gladedale has told Glasgow City Council new house building has “virtually ceased” due to the credit crunch. The firm says it is not generating enough income to allow it to carry out the road work. Clyde Gateway, the regeneration agency responsible for the East End, has agreed to provide the council with £3million. That will be passed on to Gladedale, who will repay the cash once the housing market picks up. The council will effectively repay Clyde Gateway by agreeing to fund its projects to the same amount over the next two years.”*

However work on renovating the church is only likely to start in July 2010. The DRS representative says *‘The Council has engaged the Glasgow Building Preservation Trust to co-ordinate and raise funds for the renovation of the category B listed building to form a local community and business centre. Already, the Council has pledged £500,000 towards the project with £500,000 already agreed from Gladedale and substantial sums expected from the Clyde Gateway URC, Historic Scotland, the Lottery, etc. Likely start date on £4 million project - July 2010.’*

Conclusions

The Scottish Government is supporting local communities and local community actions. Allotments are recognised as a hub for local activities. They are important for bringing people together and creating a stable local community as well as providing food and health benefits. Oatlands Allotments are helping to rebuild the local community but when the regeneration scheme and the development stalled they had great difficulty surviving. People should not be subjected to living with a demolition site with no community centre, subject to sporadic vandalism and loss of their property both huts and plants. The Council and Scottish Government should support local community action and insist the developers fulfill their obligations promptly and efficiently.

To this end we would like the following question answered:

- *When will the rubble be removed and the security cameras re-instated so that the local community and local schools can visit safely and the Allotment Association hold Open Days? Who is responsible for over-seeing this?*
- *The plans for regeneration of the area were drawn up in 2001. Times have changed with the new Government and increased emphasis on community well-being. Since the 9 phases of development are not being completed within the original timescale, are the partners still legally committed to the original plans? Can the plans for the existing allotment site be changed so that it is retained and together with the renovation of the adjoining church make a sustainable focus for community activities when the regeneration is re-started?*
- *What support from Scottish Government and local authorities is available to the plot-holders and community groups to help them garden in safety and fulfill their aspirations for the local area?*

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