

Petition by Friends of Granton Castle Walled Garden tests councillors



The Petitions Committee of the City of Edinburgh Council floundered a bit earlier today in trying to take a decision on the petition by the Friends of Granton Castle Walled Garden when it came before them.

The petition asked for support for the aims of the community group who wish to ensure that the garden will be protected for the future, but there was no related planning application so it became difficult for the committee to decide what they might do about the matter.

Convener Councillor Chas Booth said that he had enormous sympathy with the situation as presented by the petitioners. He said : "We as a petitions committee cannot take a decision on the substance of what you do, all we can do is take a decision on your petition."

Councillor Nick Gardner abstained as he was worried it might affect him adversely as a member of the planning committee in due course, if an application by EDI Group who own the land is ever made. EDI Group is an arms length company owned by the council.

Councillor Cameron Rose suggested no action should be taken on the petition.

Mark Harris, Head of Development at EDI Group, commented: "I can't see how you can make a decision on whether this should be a garden without a proper planning application with all the facts. The right place to do this is at the planning

committee.”

But Kirsty Sutherland who is a member of the Friends group explained that there would be no need for any planning application as the existing use is exactly what they want to use it for. It would only require a planning application if the land was to be used for housing.

Cllr Karen Keil suggested that the matter might be referred to EDI Group to consider what they might do, that they have a dialogue with the petitioners, in the same way as they have done with petitions concerning Lothian Buses in the past.

Kirsty told The Edinburgh Reporter after the meeting : “We were really glad they made a decision and that they were able to refer it on to an executive committee who might be able to actually do something. We were interested that Mark Harris of EDI Group had a voice at the meeting and the fact that the council had invited him, neither a council officer or an elected member, to the meeting seemed odd to us. And the committee did not note that he, or the company he represented, had a strong financial interest.

“At least we have raised awareness and put forward our knowledge of the Local Development Plan and the fact that this area is now zoned as open space. We don’t know what will happen now, and we were not sure what the Petitions Committee could actually do. Perhaps the Economy Committee can examine in more detail the health and wellbeing outcomes from our proposals and the financial impact that may have on the council.”

In a first at the Petitions committee, the matter went to a vote rather than being decided by consensus.

Eventually there was a motion to refer the matter to EDI Group to suggest that they support the petitioners’ wishes, and that the matter is given further consideration alongside the petitioners.

An alternative motion to refer the matter to the Economy Committee asking them to support the Friends group's plans was proposed by Cllr Donaldson and seconded by Cllr Booth and although it only received two votes, the Convener cast his vote (as there was a tie) and this amendment was passed.

Ally Broughton, Green candidate for Forth Ward in next year's council elections, said : "I've been impressed with the passion that local people have shown for maintaining and enhancing the historic Granton Castle Walled Garden, and I agree that this precious green space should be restored to its former glory, and not built over.

"I hope the council's Economy Committee will take note of the commitment that local people have for this space, and send a clear message to EDI, the landowner, that building on this site would not be acceptable."

We first met Kirsty Sutherland in the garden behind North Edinburgh Arts earlier in the summer. She is a gardener and part of the Friends group who want to create a large scale green hub at Granton Castle Walled Garden.

The garden is currently locked, as it has been for the last ten years. It is very overgrown and inaccessible and is currently owned by an arms length council company Waterfront Edinburgh Limited who are part of the EDI Group.

Kirsty explained to us the story behind it : "A council owned company called Waterfront Edinburgh Limited owns the garden. They are reluctant to see the historic garden continue as a garden, as it is worth far more to them financially if they can sell it as a housing development, in this case to build 17 luxury townhouses. There is no planning permission at the moment, as the application was withdrawn by the company themselves in January 2016, but they told us that they intend making a repeat application in about two to three years' time."

But Kirsty and her fellow gardeners do not feel this is yet a lost cause and intend fighting on to get what they want. "We definitely fight on! We attended a conference earlier this year which was very supportive to us. It was attended by a lot of experts from the National Trust for Scotland, Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments and some of the foremost garden historians in Britain who all support what we are doing. Historic Environment Scotland. the Federation of City Farms and the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh also support what we are doing.

"Lots of organisations understand the health and wellbeing benefits this could have. It is in between very polluted, post-industrial land which would be better suited for housing. The garden itself is pristine, fertile, unpolluted land. Local people feel it would be much more valuable restored as a garden."

So how do they go about this, and how do they persuade the council to sell or lease the garden to the community group to proceed with their vision?

"We may do something through the Community Empowerment Act which imposes a duty of care on the council who will have to respond to a Participation Request from the community."

In the event they lodged their petition to the council requesting that the council would assist them in opening the garden for sustainable uses which will benefit the well-being of the local and wider community. That petition was heard quite sympathetically today, but it is a little difficult to see what the outcome will now be.

Earlier in the year there was a meeting mediated by the council with the developers EDI Group who had previously refused entry to any of the group, or indeed representatives from the Royal Botanic Garden who wanted to survey the area for biodiversity and wildlife.

Kirsty explained at the time of our earlier interview: “The reason for refusal to allow us entry was that it is too dangerous to allow anyone access to the garden, although the same company had also told our local councillor Cllr Lesley Hinds that it was not dangerous.

“Our local MSP Ben Macpherson and Cllr Hinds have been supportive of us, but the developer see us as a body which is obstructive to their development, rather than seeing the positives which could come from allowing a green development.

“We don’t want to stop all development. We just want the garden to be developed in a sustainable green manner, good for the environment and good for the health and wellbeing of local people.

“I think the benefits would be a multiple of what we already have in North Edinburgh. We have the community garden behind North Edinburgh Arts, we have some street corners that Granton Community Gardeners have worked on. It allows people of all ages to come together to share skills, to share food. We are from all different backgrounds and cultures here in Edinburgh. Lots of people have skills that they don’t really know they have and they could share these in a garden.

“The group grew exponentially over two years and now over 150 people and about a dozen groups are involved.

“This is the oldest undeveloped walled garden in the whole of Edinburgh. It dates from late medieval times, from the time of James IV when it was his hunting lodge. In the last 100 years it was one of the last market gardens in the city growing vegetables, cut flowers and fruit. There are still some remains of the Victorian orchard there which are very productive and fruitful.

“New housing in the North Edinburgh area is much needed. I would agree that houses are needed. On the Edinburgh Waterfront redevelopment area there are over 2000 houses

planned. There is adequate land to build those on without using this land.

“The walled garden is less than 1% of the land that they are going to build on, and it is the only unpolluted bit of land that they are going to build on.”

So the campaign to ensure that this land remains a garden goes on, with recommendation to the Economy Committee that they call on the EDI Group to restore the area as a garden. The Economy Committee next meets under the convenership of Councillor Gavin Barrie who already admitted to us on Twitter that it will give him a problem as he is Economy Convener and Chair of EDI Group so he will have to relinquish his position as Convener at least for this item.

There is an alternative plan for the area in the form of Granton on Sea which is a community led regeneration project. The Granton Improvement Society has identified a number of sites owned by Waterfront Edinburgh that could be useful in the area's renewal.

Granton on Sea has three elements to it. Firstly there is a plan for an artist or artisan village built from turf-roofed sea containers on the hillside overlooking the Firth of Forth to stimulate creative economic activity across the neighbourhood.

They hope to hold an international garden festival in the historic two acre walled garden modelled on the Chaumont Festival in France.

Thirdly they plan a seaside lido also made from sea containers. The water would be heated and would create a new leisure attraction in an area which has few according to the group.

Granton Improvement Society who hope to create about 75 jobs as part of their scheme said.

As to the apparently competing claims by the two groups Kirsty Sutherland told us today they need not be in competition : “We very much hope that both of our organisations can work together for the best outcome for the walled garden.” You can see the plans the Friends’ group have [by clicking here.](#)