

Edinburgh's 'grey spaces' could be repurposed for community growing

Edinburgh Council is to investigate the city's 'grey spaces' and how they can be re-purposed for community growing projects.

The small parcels of council-owned land, such as old playgrounds and vacant hard standing, could become central to a new plan to empower more people to grow their own fruit and vegetables.

A 'right to grow' policy being considered by the authority, if adopted, would create a simple process for community groups to secure free leases to cultivate unused green spaces and re-purpose 'grey space' with planters and raised beds.

Councillor Hal Osler, who tabled a motion calling for the policy to be explored last December, said it was important people were "closer to their food".

She said access to growing space was important for communities but often came with too much red tape.

"They come with quite a lot of bureaucracy," she said, "it's actually really quite difficult for individuals to get through."

A right to grow requires local authorities to "maintain a free, accessible map of all public land that is suitable for community cultivation or wildlife projects," according to

Incredible Edible which promotes the idea. "They would also need to make it straight-forward for community groups to secure free leases to cultivate the land, and allow those groups to bid for the land should the authority decide to sell it."

Last September Hull City Council became the first UK local authority to adopt it and is now in the early stages of piloting.

In a report the council said there were "a number of actions already being progressed to develop and maintain food growing provision in the city," adding and the adoption of a right to grow policy would "need to be carefully considered alongside all of this on-going work".

Cllr Osler said: "We also have a rather weird way of thinking about land, we think of land and growing land as something which is green that you have to dig into. Well actually no you don't, we have an awful lot of redundant space – grey space.

"I would include things like the bowling greens, I would include redundant hardstanding that's littered all over our city that we haven't utilised properly. We need to investigate those areas because quite a lot of those areas attract fly tipping, anti-social car parking and all sorts of other not great environments.

The Lib Dem councillor added: "It's not just about growing food it's about growing, for the terms of improving our insect population, improving our general well-being."

Officials were given the go ahead to proceed with work on right to grow at the culture and communities committee on Thursday, August 8. The next steps will include a "mapping exercise" to identify "potential new sites for food growing, general availability of land across the city, gaps and opportunities in support," a report said.

It's anticipated detailed proposals on the scheme will not be ready until summer 2025 at the earliest.

Meanwhile the committee discussed a separate report on re-purposing old bowling greens handed back to the council by Edinburgh Leisure following declining use.

Early plans have been drawn up to use the spaces as allotments and community gardens with pavilions used as cafes and toilets.

However the total estimated cost of the projects at Victoria Park, St Margaret's Park and Prestonfield Park bowling greens is up to £3 million.

Councillors called for less costly options to make the greens available for community use, at least while funding for a longer-term vision is identified, to be brought forward at a future meeting.

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter