

Temporary Greening of Development Sites

City of Edinburgh Council

20 August 2009

1 Purpose of report

- 1.1 This report is provided in response to the motion submitted by Councillor Burgess at the Council meeting of 30 April 2009. The following motion was submitted in terms of Standing Order 28:

“That the Council:

Recognises that under current economic conditions, sites for development, such as Caltongate, may now be left undeveloped for some considerable time.

Recognises that whilst efforts should be made to get appropriate development off the ground, that these sites left undeveloped are not contributing to the city and often detract from the city’s appearance and feel especially for visitors.

Believes that some developers may welcome an opportunity to open up development sites particularly to benefit community relations and reduce security costs and therefore the cost to the Council could be minimal.

Notes a proposal to approach developers regarding temporarily greening development sites was recently agreed by City of Glasgow Council.

Therefore, believes the idea of temporarily greening development sites is an idea worth investigating and calls for a report on how this could be taken forward.”

The Council’s Decision was:

- 1) To recognise the difficulties that potential development sites faced given the current state of the UK economy.
- 2) To acknowledge the problems individual developers might have in securing finance during this recession and to ask officers to report back within two cycles on the ways Council could support developers to maintain sites in as safe and attractive condition as possible until market conditions improved, including the possibility of landscaping these sites.

- 3) To ask that the report also identify any impediments which might restrict the Council with this objective.

Main report

- 2.1 The Council has an obligation to compile returns for the government on the amount and extent of land which is vacant and derelict. The surveys are published on-line. The last survey, in 2008, recorded that there were 92 vacant or derelict sites in the Council's area, amounting to 226 hectares. The 'vacant land' situation is therefore kept under review and quantified.

- 2.2 The current survey confirms that there are very few sites in the city centre likely in particular to impact on the image and visitor experience of the city. The buoyant economic circumstances of the last fifteen years have removed almost all the long-standing 'holes in the ground' that were once a feature of the city centre. The notable sites at this time are:
 - Caltongate – site now in receivership;
 - Cowgate 'fire site' – redevelopment proposals approved, no information to suggest that development has stalled;
 - Haymarket – Council-owned, temporary car park, application proposals with Scottish Government;
 - Fountainbridge – office development approved, but not proceeding, owners intend to landscape site edges this winter.

The commercial development pipeline in the city centre is likely to have reduced significantly, but it is less clear that a problem of vacant sites comparable with the situation in the 1970s and 80s will build up. For one thing, planning powers are used to prevent demolition in conservation areas unless proposals are approved and contracts let for redevelopment. Secondly, sites in the city centre usually have value for temporary car parking use.

- 2.3 The great majority of listed vacant sites are dispersed around the city. The Council is an owner of a significant amount of these sites, after clearance of existing buildings under housing and other responsibilities. Craigmillar is a case in point, where demolition of Council-owned housing has run ahead of programmes for, and any possibility of redevelopment by up to ten years. Services have been removed from these sites, which have been soiled and seeded, and do not represent an eyesore or safety issue. There is not however, a standard practice that the Council follows, and cleared sites are dealt with as resources allow.

- 2.4 In principle, the options available to site owners, in cost order are:
 - wildflower seeding annually
 - grass seeding after preparation of ground
 - turf laying, amenity planting and landscaping around visible site edges or across the site.

Of these options, only wildflower seeding is likely to be low cost, as this may be feasible for sites covered in rubble and hardcore. However, the germination of

seed on such sites cannot be guaranteed if ground preparation is not undertaken, and there is a risk that the desired benefits may not materialise.

- 2.5 The Council could work with private landowners in an advisory capacity to improve the appearance of sites. However there are no identifiable budgets which could be used to assist private landowners. This was not the case in the past and in the 1980s the government made resources available for high cost temporary landscaping schemes. These funds were used extensively and to great effect in Leith, to the extent that residents subsequently resisted their loss when redevelopment proposals could be brought forward.
- 2.6 Another possibility that could be considered for Council land is its temporary use as allotments or community gardens. Demand for land on which to grow food has increased greatly over the past few years, and the Council currently has an allotment plot waiting list nearing 2000, which cannot be met through the existing provision of allotment sites. There are a number of issues arising from this approach:
- Under present policy, recognised allotment sites are protected from development. Policy would need to be amended to encompass temporary occupation of a future development site.
 - Growing methods would need to be adapted to site conditions. Traditional cultivation is unlikely to be possible on cleared sites.
 - It is likely that sites used for growing would need to be fenced in order to afford some security, which may significantly increase costs.

It is preferable for the Council to respond to requests for land for growing projects which emerge from the community, than to initiate such projects itself.

- 2.7 In conclusion, there does not appear to be a case for, or resources available to actively pursue a temporary greening initiative at the present time, but the situation can be held under review if an obvious candidate and a role for the Council emerged. However the Council should respond positively wherever possible to requests from the community for temporary use of its own brown field land as sites for growing fruit and vegetables, or as short-term community gardens.

3 Financial Implications

- 3.1 The temporary greening of development sites cannot be achieved within existing budgets. Proposals for temporary allotments would need to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis and would require to be individually evaluated to determine whether they could be supported from existing budgets.

4 Environmental Impact

- 4.1 Were resources to be allocated, temporary greening of development sites would have a beneficial environmental impact. The development of short-term allotments or community gardens would also have a beneficial environmental impact.

5 Recommendations

5.1 Council is asked to note the report.



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10/8/09



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Appendices None

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Wards affected City-wide

Single Outcome Agreement 12. We value and enjoy our built and natural environment and protect it and enhance it for future generations

Background Papers None