

Many thanks for inviting me to your event today. It is an enormous privilege both to be here but to also have been given the opportunity to address you today. I have also been asked by the constituency MSP and Minister for Parliamentary Business, Bruce Crawford, to extend a very hearty and warm welcome to you all to Dunblane.

I want to speak today about why I passionately believe in what SAGS does and why allotments are so important to 21st century Scotland. Your conference here today is a timely one.

I believe it is timely because it coincides with the Royal Highland Show at Ingliston which I attended yesterday. You may not automatically link these two events together, however after visiting the stalls yesterday, I'd say the vast majority of those exhibiting food were banging the drum about local produce and the need to act sustainably and to reduce food miles.

I'd say that that is a key component of what SAGS tries to promote too and so it is within a growing and positive tide of local and home grown food production that you are operating in. Therefore, I'd particularly like to focus on benefits allotments bring to the promotion of local food and how your efforts chime perfectly with the government's aims and key objectives of making Scotland greener, healthier, wealthier and fairer, and smarter.

But firstly, I want to outline where my relationship started with your organisation. I wrote an article in the Scotsman this time last year celebrating the Government's plans to pilot free school meals for primary ones to threes. I was delighted by the government's actions – but still remained concerned that although the food might be free, it might not always be local.

In my article I wrote about my experiences of going to a tiny wee school in Perthshire. It was surrounded by tattie fields and it seemed everyone's dad was either a farmer or farm worker. At the very least they lived next to a field.

Therefore, one might have expected that we, as pupils were served wholesome fresh vegetables at lunchtime? No, we either got a sickly glob of wallpaper paste in the middle

of our plates, potato waffles, or letter-shaped processed potato pieces imaginatively named Alphabites. At a time when I had no notion of the meaning of ‘carbon footprint’, I remember thinking it would be better to get a sack of tatties from the farm next door.

My article also described my anger at seeing queues of hungry bairns spilling out of each chip shop I passed on my daily lunch time stroll I used to take when working in Paisley in my previous job.

I argued that it was depressing to think that Scotland had such fine, fresh, tasty produce – yet our country, which is the home of global quality brands like Aberdeen Angus, continues to choose unhealthy foods and our children are held back from the local options.

My article rang true with your chair and secretary Peter Wright and Jenny Mollison who contacted me and asked me to co-host an event in Parliament that launched the SAGS report, Growing Scotland. It was a lively event attracting cross-party support and was made even more memorable by Peter’s home brew of red wine! I was then very kindly asked to speak to you here today.

The report I’ve just mentioned, Growing Scotland, was a wonderful document and I’d like to congratulate its authors. I never thought that when I was elected last year that allotments would become one of my areas of interest. But, already persuaded by the argument to ‘eat local’ being the daughter of a small farmer who now has his own large garden, being brought up on neeps, tatties and carrots grown in the fields and gardens around me, I guess it was no wonder that what your organisation is trying to achieve resonated so fully with me on an individual level.

As the nation’s waistline expands so it has become increasingly important that we pursue a healthier diet. But it must be more than just a simple healthy diet. Changing the views and opinions of our nation, needs to be multi faceted in its approach. We need to educate people about where food comes from and about its seasonality.

Yes, it may technically be healthier to eat strawberries in winter than it would be to eat a chocolate bar, but we have to really think about the consequences of this. How did the strawberry get here, what processes were used in its growing and how much it is costing the planet? I believe it would be better to get people reconnected with the land, to know what it is to taste a berry on a bright sunny summer day and to hear the crunch of the bite of an apple on a crisp autumnal morning. We need people to know that food isn't found in a plastic bag but takes effort, time, patience and attention to grow and is more flavoursome for it.

That is why I was pleased to hear the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Richard Lochhead MSP launch the next phase of his National Food Policy yesterday.

It will use high-profile chef Martin Wishart to improve the quality and visibility of Scottish produce used in our country's pubs and restaurants; it will place a focus on food education through Scotland's first Cooking Bus, teaching healthy, practical cooking skills to pupils, parents and community groups across the country; and it will conduct an inquiry into affordable access to food, in light of the global rise in food prices amongst other things.

I hope this marks a fresh and new future for Scottish food and drink and I firmly believe that allotments should play and be allowed to play their part in this.

Just as the Dig for Victory campaign was hugely successful during world war two in helping to secure domestic food production by promoting the planting of allotments during a national crisis, I believe allotments should be promoted as a way to help secure food when food prices are soaring, people are feeling the pinch during the current credit crunch, and there is a genuine desire to live in a much more sustainable way.

Allotments also have a role in getting people active and out in the fresh air and as Growing Scotland correctly asserts allotments, gardening and horticulture have a role in tourism, job creation, biodiversity and regeneration.

They also have huge benefits for society too. In the Clydesdale region of the South of Scotland, the area I represent, I have supported a group called Clydesdale Community Initiatives.

They help people with learning difficulties and mental health problems by getting them out and about doing landscape gardening which gives them skills and importantly builds their confidence. It also allows them to make a real and meaningful contribution to society by creating beautiful spaces.

I am also aware of communal gardens and allotments being used to help asylum seekers integrate into their new communities and other projects across Scotland that breakdown societal barriers that isolate so many of Scotland's most vulnerable groups.

I've also had the pleasure of learning about a wonderful initiative run by Sustainable Dunbar which, in the absence of any allotment space, matches older and less able people who have large gardens up with people who desperately want an allotment. They come in and care and cultivate the garden with them both sharing the produce. The result is it gets people integrated and benefits everyone. I don't know about you, but when I hear something so brilliantly simple that works so well it just makes me smile.

Conference, it's easy just to disregard allotments as something that's simply a hobby. I hope I've shown you today that I realise it's much much more than that and want to offer you my support and assistance in helping you to promote the real tangible benefits of gardening and allotments.

I am forever thankful that I wrote my Scotsman article last year otherwise I would not have had the privilege of being in contact with or hearing just how passionate SAGS are about helping the government promote its key objectives and to make a better Scotland. So please accept my sincerest thanks to you for producing such thought provoking documents that focussed my mind and opened my eyes to the real potential allotments offer Scotland.

I wish the new SAGS executive the very best for the year ahead and look forward to working with them and hope that together we can make real and tangible strides forward for the provision of allotments and to do our bit to get our nation healthier.

Thank you.