

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

**REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC REGENERATION
AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES**

TO:	HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE		
DATE:	15th DECEMBER 2020	AGENDA ITEM:	
TITLE:	ALLOTMENTS CONSULTATION REPORT AND NEXT STEPS		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	KAREN ROWLAND	PORTFOLIO:	CULTURE, HERITAGE AND RECREATION
SERVICE:	ENVIRONMENTAL AND COMMERCIAL SERVICES	WARDS:	BOROUGHWIDE
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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 Reading Borough Council is committed to providing an allotments service to residents. The Council is conscious that some tenants rely on the produce that they grow on their plots to feed themselves and their families. The Council is also aware that maintaining an allotment has significant physical and mental health benefits and, in view of the declared climate emergency, that the use of allotments needs to be supported as a local, sustainable food source with essentially near zero food miles being created.
- 1.2 The Council is undertaking a review of the current allotment management and charging model in order to achieve an agreed budget saving to support the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).
- 1.3 A consultation with all tenants was initiated on 17 August 2020 to gauge tenants' interest in and ability to form site associations that could take on aspects of self-management, specifically including site management, some grounds maintenance and waste management.

- 1.4 This report summarises the results of the consultation and recommends both the immediate next steps and proposals for a more comprehensive strategy for future management and maintenance of the allotments service.

Appendix A: Allotments Consultation Report

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That Members note the report and the findings of the consultation of tenants.
- 2.2 That the committee endorse the next steps as shown in section 6 of this report.
- 2.3 That an updated Allotments Plan is created, is subject to public consultation and is reported for approval to a future Committee.
- 2.4 That an annual Allotment Plan progress report is brought to HNL Committee at its Autumn meeting in 2021.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 The provision of allotments is a statutory service. Under S.23 of the Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908, a Council has a statutory duty to provide a sufficient number of allotments and to let them to persons residing in its area who want them.
- 3.2 Reading Borough Council continues to provide and promote allotments not only as part of statutory requirement but also because of the significant social, health and environmental benefits.
- 3.3 The Council's Corporate Plan 2018 - 2021 'Shaping Reading's Future' sets out the Council's priorities, which include promoting healthy lifestyles, as well as good education, leisure and cultural opportunities for people in Reading.
- 3.4 In view of the declared climate emergency, the use of allotments needs to be supported as a local, sustainable food source.

4. THE CURRENT SITUATION

- 4.1 Reading Borough Council manages 20 allotment sites, consisting of 1,338 workable plots, and covering 41.5 ha of land (see table 1). Most of these are statutory sites: allotment sites owned by local authorities can be designated

as 'statutory' or 'temporary' where 'statutory' sites are subject to some protection under the Allotments Act 1925; 'temporary' sites have no security beyond the usual planning system requirements.

Table 1: Allotment sites provided by Reading Borough Council

Statutory Sites	Area (Ha)	Temporary Sites	Area (Ha)
Bulmershe	13.73	Ardler Road	0.11
Coley	1.81	Ashampstead Road	0.19
Emmer Green	0.74	Balmore	0.55
Goddards Farm	1.76	Caversham Court	0.41
Lower Southcote	4.37	Circuit Lane	1.03
Newcastle Road	0.64	George Street	0.23
Oakley Road	0.68	Henley Road	2.67
Oaktree Road	2.22	Meadway	0.59
Scours Lane	5.36	Mockbeggar	0.38
Waterloo Meadows	3.52	Victoria Road	0.48
Total	34.83	Total	6.63

- 4.2 In 2006 the Council carried out a full review of its allotments, drawing up an Allotments Strategy that dealt with streamlining administration and physical improvements to allotments infrastructure on a site-by-site basis. By 2009, following a surge in demand for allotments, the Strategy required review. Proposed actions included converting whole plots to half plots; moving to a policy of only one plot per household; improving eviction rates of absent tenants; and acquiring new land for plots, either by purchase or by converting other public open space to allotments. Due to practical and financial constraints only the re-sizing of plots has been achieved to date.
- 4.3 During 2017, an efficiency saving designed to increase income from allotment rentals from £35k to £70k p.a. spread over 2 years was included in the annual budget-setting process. This required doubling the basic rental, removing tiered concessions - limiting these to people on income support - and carrying out a review of the current plot sizes. A remaining savings target of £26k remains to be secured and the proposals in this paper support the delivery of this.
- 4.4 However, the Council is conscious that significant rent increases may impact badly on some tenants who rely on the food that they grow on their plots and for whose physical and mental wellbeing allotments gardening is important. Consequently, the Council is considering ways to reduce costs without further significant increases to those managing an allotment.
- 4.5 Over the past few years, the Council has been approached by allotments tenants looking for more say in the management of sites, faster turn-around times in letting vacant plots, and different ways of delivering a range of

allotments services. This interest does coincide in a timely way with the need by the Council to streamline its use of resources, which is now even more urgent with the extra costs of the coronavirus pandemic.

5. PUBLIC CONSULTATION

5.1 In 2020 a consultation with all tenants was undertaken from 17 August to 17 September on the following issues:

- Self-management of sites
- Tenant maintenance of sites
- Alternatives to rubbish removal

5.2 A consultation letter was sent to all tenants; emails (including an information sheet) were sent to tenants with email; leaflets were left on 400 plots and sheds; following the completion of a Covid risk assessment, an officer visited each site at least twice to encourage participation and answer queries; and the officer was invited to six tenant-arranged site meetings.

5.3 Responses were directed to an online consultation survey and to the Allotments email inbox. Tenants met on site visits were encouraged to discuss the issues with others, and to respond individually or collectively.

5.4 A total of 452 responses or contacts were received: 197 via the online survey, 70 via the Allotments inbox, 185 tenants through site visits, and a few phone calls were made direct to the Parks Team.

5.5 Appendix A Allotments Consultation Report sets out a summary of the responses from the consultation. There are several clear messages arising from the consultation:

- There is some understanding of the financial constraints facing councils, and the implications of this for the Allotments Service; many tenants believe that RBC does a reasonable job under the circumstances and accept that allotments are not the Council's only priority
- The main issues that tenants would like to see resolved are the number of vacant or untended plots, the encroachment of boundaries leading to lost plots, the behaviour of other tenants and illegal or inappropriate dumping of household waste in waste-designated or undesignated areas
- Tenants are particularly concerned by delays in re-letting plots that fall vacant or are untended
- Many respondents have been disappointed by the Council's speed to deal with unkempt plots, and the maintenance of communal areas

- Roughly half of respondents are willing to be involved in self-management of sites, although only a quarter want to be involved in some sort of committee
- The extent and form of this involvement differs from site to site; tenants were relieved that the Council has not pre-designed the model it wishes to see implemented for imposition on tenants
- Most respondents interested in a degree of self-management want support in setting this up from the Council or other organisations, like Food4Families or horticultural societies
- Seven sites are ready to take on some form of self-management immediately.
- Around two thirds of respondents are willing to be involved in tenant maintenance of sites, particularly in looking after the area around their plots; there is also support for tenant work parties
- Tenants want sites cleared and repairs carried out before they get involved in either management or maintenance
- Tenants have conflicting views on waste management: many want waste and compost piles, with the Council removing waste, while others are concerned that waste heaps become opportunities for fly-tipping
- Respondents are sanguine about rent rises and/or other charges, like a deposit when the offer of a plot is taken up or a charge for waste removal.

6. THE PROPOSAL

6.1 The Council needs time to put together detailed actions arising out of the consultation. Given the significant variety in levels of willingness and in the form and extent of involvement to which tenants wish to contribute, no one-size-fits-all approach will be possible, and progress will be in different directions at different speeds on different sites.

6.2 However, there is momentum arising out of the successful consultation, and, in order to take advantage of the groundswell of enthusiasm, some early action will be taken to encourage those who are ready to be involved.

6.3 It is proposed that:

- The Council will commence working with representatives on the seven sites that are interested in self-management focusing on the vexed issue of identifying untended plots, resolving whether these are available for re-letting, and issuing offers. Site representatives will notify the Council about which plots require 'weedy letters' (notification to plot holders by letter about overgrown plots) and then will meet prospective new tenants to show them the plot and hand out keys once a contract has been exchanged. The Council will retain administrative and invoicing functions. Learning

outcomes from these seven sites will be recorded and used to influence the revised Allotments Plan reported below.

- The Council will initiate immediately a programme of clearances of unkempt plots on these seven sites as a matter of priority, as well as other winter works, like hedge cutting and fence and driveway repairs. This will meet the requests for sites to be in good order before site representatives get involved in management tasks.
- Maintenance on other sites will follow, so that no site is left untidy at the end of the winter.
- Regular reports on occupancy ratios and re-letting turnover will be published on a new allotments page on the website, as a way to allow the other RBC sites to observe the improvements that are possible with very limited tenant involvement.
- Information about self-management schemes and other issues of interest to allotment holders will also be published on the website.
- The Council continue with its progress towards electronic payments and communication for all hired services by applying this to allotment rental payments from January 2021, making allowances for the small number of tenants unable to make electronic payments
- During 2021-22, a revised Allotments Plan, setting out the Council's longer-term objectives for the service, will be drafted and then circulated for wider consultation with tenants and elected Members.
- Groups like Food4Families and horticultural societies be engaged to support tenant groups that wish to take on management and/or maintenance tasks
- Fees, charges and concessions will be reviewed and a new structure agreed for implementation in January 2022
- Additional personnel for engagement with allotment tenants will be sought for the period during which the Allotments Plan is drawn up and being consulted on.
- Where available, bids will be made for funding to make good site infrastructure on those sites working towards self-management. This includes fence replacement where needed and road repairs.'
- The Allotments Plan will be presented to a future committee to allow time to notify tenants of any material changes to be applied when leases are renewed in January 2022.

Programme for proposed changes

ACTION	NOTES	DATE	METHOD
Housing Neighbourhoods & Leisure Committee Report		December 2020	Written report
CONSULTATION RESULTS & PROVISIONAL CONCLUSIONS	All tenants	December 2020	Email Website
SELF-MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SOURCES		December 2020	Website
ON-GOING COMMUNICATION WITH TENANTS	Site reps and all tenants	When required	Email Notice boards
MEETINGS WITH SITES READY FOR SELF-MANAGEMENT		February 2021	Site meetings
PROVISIONAL TARGETS - 7 SITES ENGAGED IN SOME SELF-MANAGEMENT - SITE AUDITS OF PILOT SITES - WINTER CLEAN-UP FOR PILOT SITES - WINTER WORKS TO OTHER SITES		End Mar 2021 Completed Nov/Dec 2020 Jan/Feb 2021	Officer engagement GM teams GM teams
RENTS, FEES AND CHARGES	Inflation only Full review	January 2021 Effective Jan 22	Electronic invoicing Letter; electronic invoicing
ALLOTMENTS PLAN	Draft Policy Committee	Summer 2021 Autumn 2021	
MONTHLY UPDATES		When required	Website

7. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

7.1 The proposals contained in this report are in line with the following Corporate Plan priorities:

- Keeping Reading's environment clean, green and safe
- Promoting health, education, wellbeing and culture
- Ensuring the Council is fit for the future

7.2 The Council has also adopted a Strategic Framework (March 2020) which sets out the Council's key priorities including:

- To keep social care services running for the children and adults who need them
- To support vulnerable and isolated people during the crisis
- To support business and the economy, which will secure the long-term recovery of Reading

8. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

8.1 Updates and other useful information should be provided regularly via the Council website, social media, and on-site signboards.

9. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

9.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, the Council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act.
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

9.2 The Council has reviewed the scope of the project as outlined within this report and considers that the proposals have no direct impact on any groups with protected characteristics.

10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 Rights and responsibilities relating to allotments provision are defined in the Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908.

11. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 The proposals set out in this paper seek to deliver all or part of the commitment to save £26k as required by the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy.
- 11.2 Where available, bids will be made for funding in in order to make improvements to infrastructure are identified in this report.

12. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 In view of the declared climate emergency and the adoption of the Climate Change Strategy the use of allotments needs to be supported as a local, sustainable food source with essentially near zero food miles being created.

13. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 13.1 Appendix A : Allotments Consultation Report