

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE		
DATE:	10 TH NOVEMBER 2021		
TITLE:	ALLOTMENTS SELF MANAGEMENT UPDATE		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	KAREN ROWLAND	PORTFOLIO:	CULTURE, HERITAGE AND RECREATION
SERVICE:	ENVIRONMENTAL AND COMMERCIAL SERVICES	WARDS:	BOROUGHWIDE
LEAD OFFICER:	ANDREW EDWARDS	TEL:	0118 937 3486
JOB TITLE:	ASSISTANT DIRECTOR FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND COMMERCIAL SERVICES	E-MAIL:	andrew.edwards@reading.gov.uk

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 To update Members of the Committee on the progress towards establishing self-management as an option for managing the Council's 20 allotment sites.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That Members note the content of the report.
- 2.2 That a Self-Management Allotment Plan is brought to the March 2022 meeting of the Committee for adoption.
- 2.3 That self-management of allotments is introduced as an option from 1st June 2022.

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 2021- 2022 'Investing in 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 PROPOSAL

4.1 Current Position:

4.1.1 Reading Borough Council manages 20 allotment sites, consisting of 1,338 workable plots, and covering 41.5 ha of land. 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.

4.1.2 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 set out in the December 2021 reports and in this paper support the delivery of this.

4.1.3 However, the Council is conscious that significant rent increases may impact adversely 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.

4.1.4 A number of actions were agreed by the Committee at its meeting in December 2020 that are captured in the Allotments Action Plan, an updated version of which is shown in Appendix A. The implementation of the project has been adversely impacted by the pressure on resources caused by the Covid 19 pandemic. The following is a summary of the progress made:

Potential Self-management groups

Since the publication of the consultation report at the end of 2020, the Parks Team have provided active support and advice to groups or active individuals at the following sites: Waterloo Meadows, Ardler Road, Newcastle Road, Scours Lane, Victoria Road, Oakley Road, Meadway and Mockbeggar which is reflected in the action plan (Appendix 1).

Site clearance and improvement

Over and above routine maintenance, the Parks Team has made significant progress in clearing and levelling overgrown and abandoned plots on the following sites: Ardler Road (10 plots recovered and made available for letting); Balmore Walk; Victoria Road (nearly 20 plots created/recovered); Oakley Road (5 plots reclaimed and others cleared); and Newcastle Road. Mockbeggar will be carried out in September. Additionally; clearance and/or additional ad hoc maintenance work has also been done at Waterloo Meadows, Goddards Farm, Scours Lane and Oak Tree Road.

Allotment Project Officer

The most significant progress has been the appointment of a fixed term Project Officer who starts work on the 1st October 2021. They will lead all aspects of the introduction of self-management in allotments and develop further the Allotments Plan. Their principal focus is as follows:

- Define the appropriate self-management model based on existing best practice.
- Draft an updated Allotments Plan, following internal consultation with Officers and Members and seek its approval at the March 2022 meeting of the committee.
- Carry out further consultation with tenants with a view to introducing the option of the proposed new self-management system for allotments from 1st June 2022.
- Liaise with embryo self-management groups, dealing with their concerns and enquiries
- Create web page content to post information for use by tenants and site management groups
- Review fees and charges (working with managers)
- Adopt and implement an electronic invoicing and payments system.

4.2 It is proposed that all elements of the Action Plan are progressed and that the completed allotment plan is brought to the March 2022 meeting of the Committee for approval prior to implementation from 1st June 2022.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

5.1 Reading Borough Council's vision is:

To help Reading realise its potential - and to ensure that everyone who lives and works here can share the benefits of its success.

5.2 The proposals contained in this report contribute to the Corporate Plan priorities as follows:

- Creating a healthy environment.
Allotments provide residents with an opportunity to produce food locally and to reduce food miles. Access to nature in urban settings contributes to improved mental and physical health and a healthy lifestyle.
- Creating thriving communities
Allotment gardening offers benefits to all residents, that help to ameliorate the lack of social capital embodied by loneliness and enables citizens to contribute to society, especially beyond retirement as part of like-minded communities with a shared goal and shared achievements.
- Creating an inclusive economy. Allotment gardening offers informal learning opportunities for users of all ages.

- Allotment grown produce can be sold and offers a cheap source of healthy food to residents.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The Council has made commitments relating to climate change and the UK Government declared a Climate Change emergency in 2019. As a result, a high-level assessment has been undertaken on the switch from Council management to self-management of statutory allotments on carbon emissions.

- Energy Use - No known impacts.

- Waste Generation - Residents will be encouraged to compost more arisings and dispose of non-compostable items themselves. Management groups will monitor materials brought onto site which will reduce the frequency of fly-tipping. These factors will result in less waste being generated and removed from sites by the Council. Work to identify the savings in avoided land-fill and composting disposal charges will take place over the next 6 months.

- Transport - As maintenance is gradually taken over by tenants self management groups this will result in fewer journeys to allotments for Council vehicles.

It has also been assessed whether the decision will improve resilience to climate change impacts.

- Heatwaves - No known impacts
- Drought - No known impacts
- Flooding - No known impacts
- High Winds/Storms - No known impacts
- Disruption to Supply Chains - No known impacts

The overall rating assigned to this decision is a low positive one.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

7.1 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
-

7.2 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.

7.3 The main consultation findings are summarised below:

- 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.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

8.1 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.

8.2 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.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

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

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 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.

10.2 Where available, bids will be made for funding in order to make improvements to infrastructure are identified in this report.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

11.1 HNL Report 6th July 2021

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The financial implications arising from the proposals set out in this report are set out below:-

1. Revenue Implications

Use this Table in the report or as an Appendix to set out the revenue implications:

	2021/22 £000	2022/23 £000	2023/24 £000
Employee costs (see note1)		-15	
Other running costs		-10	
Capital financings costs			
Expenditure		-25	
Income from:			
Fees and charges (see note2)		-1	
Grant funding (specify)			
Other income			
Total Income		-1	
Net Cost(+)/saving (-)		-26	

The net cost of the proposal can be funded from (specify service and approved cost centre budget).

2. Value for Money (VFM)

The proposal is intended to reduce costs whilst continuing to provide allotments to residents. This model of allotment management is common and successfully implemented across the UK and reduces the Council's input and costs.

3. Risk Assessment.

There is a risk that an insufficient number of allotment sites will successfully move to self-management thus reducing the projected saving.