

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH & NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE		
DATE:	10TH MARCH 2022		
TITLE:	ALLOTMENTS SELF MANAGEMENT UPDATE		
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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 progress of the Allotments Action Plan and Allotments Self-Management Plan, note further work required to develop greater levels of self-management across all Council allotment sites

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 local residents 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 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. There are very successful community-managed allotments sites all over the country, and interest in how this might work in Reading is growing.
- 4.1.5 This interest dovetails with the Council's need to streamline its use of resources at exactly the time that it faces a sharp increase in demand for allotments. This demand is fuelled by a renewed interest in healthy living and outdoor pursuits during the Covid pandemic.
- 4.1.6 A number of actions were agreed by the HNL 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. Project implementation has increased since the temporary appointment of an Allotment Project Officer in October 2021. Progress and further action is being split into three Plans, Self-Management, Site Maintenance, and Tenancy Management. The Plans overlap and inter-relate but are split to provide a clearer picture to specific stakeholders of activity that is relevant to them. The Self-Management Plan can be found at Appendix B while the other plans will be compiled by Spring 2022.

4.2 SELF-MANAGEMENT PLAN

- 4.2.1 Appendix B sets out the Service's view of the achievements made by allotment site tenants working with the Council towards self-management. There is a positive correlation between sites' progress to self-management and the Council's focus on 'whole-site overhauls' that take in major site maintenance,

identification of abandoned plots, contacting absentee tenants, and site meetings to discuss the benefits of self-management to the tenants and to their overall site. In November 2020 there were eight sites either showing an interest in the notion of self-management or actively carrying out some self-management functions. By January 2022, this number had increased to 14 through the pro-active work of the Allotment Project Officer and the willingness of the allotment tenants to consider a greater involvement in the management of allotment sites.

4.2.2 Appendix B also sets out activities that count as acts of self-management that each site is either currently carrying out or is expressing interest in doing. The first step a site group must take is to collate its own tenant contact list and enhance their on-site communication. The next step for the site is to appoint a Council Liaison Rep through whom communication flows.

4.2.3 Sites presently actively engaging in this process are:

- Ardler Road
- Ashampstead
- Circuit Lane
- Emmer Green
- George Street*
- Goddards Farm*
- Henley Road
- Lower Southcote
- Meadway*
- Mockbeggars*
- Newcastle Road*
- Oakley Road*
- Scours Lane*
- Waterloo Meadows*.

Sites marked * are the most advanced. Appendix B sets out three case studies from Goddards Farm, Scours Lane and Newcastle Road, which are sites that are advancing well. On the remaining six sites, promotion of self-management has either yet to begin or efforts to promote have not gained traction. Initial meetings and fresh efforts to engage are planned for these sites by Spring 2022.

4.2.4 Tenants and their groups on sites showing keenness for self-management have noted and appreciated the Council's tighter focus and coordination of site maintenance and tenancy management work. Some have commented that the Council's approach has helped to persuade sceptical tenants to join in the development of their allotment communities.

4.2.5 All sites involved describe their approach to the idea of self-management as needing to take baby steps, trying out lower-level tasks to see if the group works well together. Some have said they have found that success has bred success and they are developing interest in trying more challenging aspect of self-management.

4.3 SITE MAINTENANCE PLAN

- 4.3.1 The need for site overhauls was identified by tenants in the 2020 consultation as being a condition of them considering adoption of self-management. Work to deliver the necessary improvements to sites that initially expressed an interest in self-management commenced in January 2021. Site clearance, improvements to paths, fencing repairs and other infrastructural work was carried out at Ardler Road, Victoria Road, Oakley Road and Balmore, creating over 20 new plots for letting, and started at George Street.
- 4.3.2 Since October 2021, complete site overhauls (to vacant plots, boundaries, access, security) have been completed at George Street, Newcastle Road, Goddards Farm and Meadway, and have yielded an additional 43 plots to be made available for letting. Programmed next are Mockbeggars, Scours Lane, Circuit Lane, Emmer Green, and Lower Southcote. Major one-off maintenance works are planned or being programmed at Waterloo Meadows and Henley Road. Reactive site maintenance at other sites continues. Most major groundworks occur over the winter months when the Grounds Maintenance teams have sufficient capacity.

4.4 TENANCY MANAGEMENT PLAN - To be drafted

- 4.4.1 “Sorting out the un-tended and vacants plots” is the most common priority request that tenants give the Council. After site maintenance, as described above, tenants ask that attention be given to tenancy management issues, which they identify is a pre-condition of their appetite for self-management.
- 4.4.2 The appointment of an Allotments Project Officer has provided capacity to identify absentee or non-compliant tenants. This has freed up plots to let and helps make the groundworks effort more cost-effective. At George Street, Goddards Farm and Meadway, fifteen absentee tenants surrendered their plots after correspondence from the Council. Furthermore, groups said that the process of tackling anti-social or nuisance tenants needed to be dealt with by the landlord. On other sites, the Council has been involved in either mediation, arbitration, or enforcement of tenancy conditions with seven tenants since October 2021.
- 4.4.3 Some aspects of ‘Tenancy Management’ have or are being adopted by sites which notify the Council of outgoing or absentee tenants, problem plots and their tenants. Other activities include showing prospective tenants around and explaining the sign-up process, sharing better practice in site waste management, taking on clearance of vacated plots, and organising work parties. Volunteers have carried out practical and administrative tasks on behalf of the Council on several sites including Goddards Farm, Scours Lane and Newcastle Road, thus freeing up the Allotment Project Officer to focus on other sites.
- 4.4.4 The headline self-management task that falls under ‘Tenancy Management’ is the trialling and uptake of ‘Local Lettings’. Tenant groups that want to manage their own waiting list can do so on entering a Data Sharing Agreement with the Council and on condition that participants consent to the sharing of their details with the tenant group. Five sites have expressed an interest in trialling Local Lettings. The Council maintains responsibility for letting tenancies and for billing but is relieved of the practicalities of arranging offers and viewings.

- 4.4.5 The initial Allotment Action Plan states the need for a review of rents, charges and discounts to be completed by June 2022. However, the need properly to consult on proposals is essential and will require longer to complete. Case law relating to Section 10(1) Allotments Act 1950 (the ‘reasonability’ of rent levels) suggests that in considering rent increases, “*representations made by or on behalf of tenants should be listened to*”. A formal consultation on rent levels is therefore required. The Council will also be consulting on other matters, as per the Allotment Action Plan, Appendix A. Combining the findings from these consultations with the emerging benefits derived from self-management action presents an opportunity to set Reading’s allotments on a robust financial and organisational footing for the 21st Century.
- 4.4.6 Further tasks have been identified as needing to fall under the Tenancy Management Plan. These include reviewing and updating the Tenancy Agreement Conditions, considering how to cover the cost of disposal of site waste, setting up a structure for charging outgoing tenants for the cost of clearing abandoned, neglected plots, and agreeing to an enforcement process for tenants in serious breach of tenancy.
- 4.4.7 Also within the proposed Tenancy Management Plan are the need to overhaul databases to allow better communication; improved billing systems; reviewing all waiting lists; redrafting all site plans (plot sizes, plot numbering, lifespan of site infrastructure); and a review of the tenure and usage of Council sheds on sites.

4.5 Next Steps

- 4.5.1 It is proposed that all elements of the Allotment Action Plan are progressed, that the Site Maintenance and Tenancy Management Plans, and the necessary consultation proposals are drawn up in consultation and be brought to a future HNL Committee meeting.

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 The foundation for this report is the 2020 Allotment Consultation Report and is updated through ongoing dialogue with existing and emerging allotment committees and societies.

7.2 Two documents were enclosed in this year's billing letters. First was an outline of progress on uptake of self-management and second was a shortened and clearer version of the tenancy agreement conditions, as requested by those seen on site visits.

7.3 A short survey of the nine Site Liaison Reps have reported that the Council's efforts to promote notions and uptake of joint-/self-management since October 2021 have brought more curiosity and meaningful involvement of their fellow tenants in the issue of self-management.

7.4 The Allotment Project Officer reports a mixed reception among tenants met on initial site visits but continues to find genuine appreciation that the Council is taking the trouble to listen to and act on their opinions.

7.5 Levels of positive feedback and support for self-management have been observed by officers on sites where Council presence and input is greatest. Feedback,

positive and negative, is received by Parks Service staff working on site and via email and telephone.

- 7.6 A key adaptation to the Council's approach has been to work up the whole site approach with tenants in advance of carrying out any tasks. This adaptation arose because tenants asked for it.

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 15 December 2020 "Allotment Consultation Report"

- 11.2 HNL Report 10th November 2021. "Allotments Self-Management"

- 11.2 Appendix A - Allotment Action Plan 2022

- 11.3 Appendix B - Allotment Self-Management Plan and Case Studies

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL
REPORT TEMPLATE

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).

Note 1: Specifying any one-off early retirement and redundancy costs. With regard to early retirement costs set out capitalised pension cost and pay-back period in a separate paragraph.

Note 2: In a separate table/appendix set out detailed fees and charges proposals and sensitivity analysis.

2. Capital Implications

Capital Programme reference from budget book: page line	2021/22 £000	2022/23 £000	2023/24 £000
Proposed Capital Expenditure			
Funded by			
Grant (specify)			
Section 106 (specify)			
Other services			
Capital Receipts/Borrowing			
Total Funding			

Note: where more than one option /proposal is being made it may be easier to set out the above information in an Appendix.

3. 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 reduces the Council's input and costs.

4. Risk Assessment.

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