

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY FRANCES MARTIN  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

<b>TO:</b>	HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE		
<b>DATE:</b>	4 <sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2023		
<b>TITLE:</b>	ALLOTMENTS SELF MANAGEMENT UPDATE		
<b>LEAD COUNCILLOR:</b>	KAREN ROWLAND	<b>PORTFOLIO:</b>	ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES & COMMUNITY SAFETY
<b>SERVICE:</b>	ENVIRONMENTAL AND COMMERCIAL SERVICES	<b>WARDS:</b>	BOROUGHWIDE
<b>LEAD OFFICER:</b>	ANDREW EDWARDS	<b>TEL:</b>	0118 937 3486
<b>JOB TITLE:</b>	ASSISTANT DIRECTOR - ENVIRONMENTAL AND COMMERCIAL SERVICES	<b>E-MAIL:</b>	andrew.edwards@reading.gov.uk

**1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 To update Members of the Committee on the progress made on the actions contained in the Allotment Action Plan and on the uptake of Self-Management practices across 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, and note the further work needed to develop greater levels of self-management across all sites.
- 2.2 That Members approve a Rent Review in Spring 2023 to allow for a consultation period on proposals prior to giving statutory 12 months' notice period to tenants of agreed new fees and charges.
- 2.3 That Members approve the proposed change to the start date of the Allotment Year from January to April and approve the revised Tenancy Agreement Conditions for consultation.
- 2.4 That Members note the proposal to introduce charging for collection and disposal of tenants' plot waste on completion of a site-by-site waste generation study.
- 2.5 That a further update report to include rent review consultation findings, a proposed new rent structure and the proposal to consider charging for site waste collection be brought to a future HNL Committee meeting.

### **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 residents who want them.
- 3.2 The Council continues to meet this duty and to support social, health and environmental benefits of allotments through the provision of allotment sites.
- 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 and against the backdrop of a cost-of-living crisis, the provision and use of allotments remains vital and needs to be supported as a cost-effective, local, sustainable food source.

### **4. THE PROPOSAL**

#### **4.1 Current Position:**

- 4.1.1 The Council owns and manages 20 sites, consisting of 1,413 workable plots (up 75 since March 2020) across 41.5 ha of land. Half are Statutory sites. Statutory sites are subject to some protection under the Allotments Act 1925 while 'temporary' sites have no security beyond planning system requirements.
- 4.1.2 In 2017, the budget-setting process included the proposal to increase allotment rental income from £35k to £70k p.a. over two years. This would have required doubling the basic rental, removing tiered concessions (and limiting discounts to those on Income Support), and carrying out a review of plot sizes from 2018/19 onward. A savings target of £26k is still 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 The Council is mindful that the 2017 rent level proposal would adversely affect tenants from low-income households. The Council's set out to reduce the rent increases proposed in 2017 by promoting Self-Management that would generate savings and then by recalculating income targets through a better-informed Rent Review in 2021/22 and onward.
- 4.1.4 Though tenants expressed mixed appetite for Self-Management in the 2020 Consultation, sites trying self-management activities have already helped the Council address running costs by reducing demand for various aspects of the allotment management. Some examples of this are as follows,
  - Sites can spot absentee tenants and allocate new tenants quicker than the Council. They thereby reduce vacancy periods in which plots may become unlettable without input from the Grounds Team.
  - SLRs (Site Liaison Representative) save the service time by showing new tenants to plots, signing them up, and explaining tenant responsibilities.
  - Some SLRs carry out plot surveys and follow up absentee tenants on behalf of the Council. Calculating the many savings being generated is not exact, but a site carrying out plot-surveys and tenant chase-ups can save the Council between 2 and 10 hours, depending on the site.

- Volunteers answer many tenant queries that would otherwise be directed to the Council. Each general allotment enquiry handled by a site saves the Council at least 15 minutes of work.

4.1.5 The Allotment Action Plan (an updated version is shown in Appendix A. Table 1) sets out actions agreed at the December 2020 HNL Committee. The Project began with the 6-month full-time secondment of an Allotment Project Officer in October 2021. On completion of the secondment, the Officer's position was extended two years at two days per week. Actions are split into three Plans, Self-Management (see para 4.2 and Appendix A Table 2), Tenancy Management (see para 4.3), and Site Maintenance (see para 4.6) that inter-relate but are split to provide a clearer picture to specific stakeholders of activity that is relevant to them.

## 4.2 SELF-MANAGEMENT PLAN

4.2.1 Since October 2021, the Council's Allotment Self-Management Project has helped tenant groups to play a greater part in managing their sites. The model being used follows Oxford City Council (OCC) where all 35 sites have devolved management run by site Committees reporting to the Oxford Federation of Allotment Associations, who in turn work in partnership with OCC.

4.2.2 Appendix A Table 2 shows the direction of travel of the sites toward joint/self-management as at December 2022. Appetite and uptake vary across the sites. For example,

- Ashampstead decided they do not want to take on self-management but have a Site Liaison Representative (SLR) who reports site suggestions and problems direct to the Allotment Project Officer.
- Emmer Green (Grove Road) has one highly active SLR who has collated a tenant database, acts as a communication link between tenants and the Council (and vice versa), can call on other volunteers to help with tasks, but has no urge to move toward forming an Allotment Society yet. Their SLR reports poor plot cultivation to the Council, manages plot lettings, helps coordinate site improvements.
- Scours Lane have an Allotment Association, Lane Reps and an elected Committee that has just held its first AGM. The Committee holds their own comprehensive tenant register, carries out routine plot inspections, chases absentee tenants and refers aberrant tenants to the Council for action. They also hold work party days, social events and have taken joint-responsibility for site security issues.

4.2.3 Sites presently actively engaging in this process are:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| • Ardler Road                            | • Emmer Green*                                     |
| • Ashampstead (SLR only)                 | • George Street (progress slowed since March 2022) |
| • Balmore (new since March 2022)         | • Goddards Farm*                                   |
| • Bulmershe (first meeting only)         | • Henley Road*                                     |
| • Caversham Court (Initial meeting only) | • Lower Southcote*                                 |
| • Circuit Lane                           | • Meadway*   |
| • Coley (SLR & helper)                   | • Mockbeggars*                                     |
|  | • Newcastle Road*                                  |
|  | • Oak Tree Road (Started 2022)                     |

- Oakley Road\*
- Scours Lane\*
- Victoria Road (Acting SLR engaged, one site meeting since March 2022)
- Waterloo Meadows\*

Sites marked \* are the most advanced. The most encouraging examples of progress include,

- Scours Lane holding its first AGM; Circuit Lane electing its first Committee; Mockbeggars constituting its own Allotment Society.
- Regular plot surveys reported to the Council from Emmer Green (Grove Road), Goddards Farm, Henley Road, Meadway, Mockbeggar, Newcastle Road, Scours Lane, and Waterloo Meadows.
- SLRs and tenants involved in drawing up site maintenance plans at Henley Road and Lower Southcote (Brunel Road).
- Caversham sites discussing possible joint Caversham Allotment Federation.
- Scours Lane Committee agreeing to and notifying all tenants that the site will use on-site composting/recycling and move towards zero-waste collections by the Council.
- Significant improvements in waste-streaming at Henley Road, Newcastle Road, and Scours Lane.
- Self-organised clearance of an uncultivable area and creation of woodland glade social area at Oakley Road.
- Key/padlock exchanges run jointly between SLRs and the Council at Emmer Green, Newcastle Road, and Scours Lane.

4.2.4 The observed reduction in allotment service requests (complaints, enquiries, chase-ups, etc.) looks to be a result of the Council's drive to improve its service while empowering tenants to handle issues themselves, either alone or with the service. Prior to the start of the Project, the service would receive 40 complaints/enquiries per month. This has reduced to 13 per month in the last year. This reduction may be in part due to improved call handling at Call Centre stage, but is also due to the following factors,

- SLRs are acting as sites' first port of call for general tenant queries.
- SLRs are contacting waiting list tenants who agreed to the Council sharing their contact details. This reduces the numbers of callers asking when they might get their first tenancy. The Council has also now contacted waiting lists for most sites asking if each tenant wishes to remain on the waiting list and advising of current waiting times. This has reduced waiting lists by up to 40% as some customers withdraw their applications.
- Some SLRs act as spare keys/padlock holders. SLRs can distribute replacement keys faster than the Council can. Tenants with access problems are now more likely to contact their SLR than the Council.
- Overall feedback from sites is that tenants no longer feel that the only way to prompt a service is to make a complaint. The scale of achievements on sites has persuaded doubtful tenants that the Council has not forgotten them.
- A key system change has been the SLRs having the Project Officer's direct number so they can seek advice on self-management issues and benefit from swift responses that they can feed back to their sites.

4.2.5 Special mention must be made of Oak Tree Road. In the 2020 Consultation, the site showed no appetite for any form of self-management, believing that the Council had neglected the site so that it could be sold for development. The site

was thus low priority for whole-site overhaul that has that has proved so successful in stimulating interest in self-management elsewhere. The Project Officer booked a site meeting for November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022, at which around 45 tenants attended. Their response and interest were at odds with their opinions in the 2020 Consultation. 11 tenants volunteered to act as block representatives, two as Site Liaison Representatives. Within a week, they met again, distributed responsibility for blocks, drafted, and sent the Council an excellent site maintenance plan. From a standing start, the site's ambition was as welcome as it was unexpected. Maintaining momentum at this stage hinges on the Project Officer supporting them and ensuring the whole-site overhaul goes ahead as planned and agreed with the volunteers.

- 4.2.6 All-round communication continues to improve. SLRs and Committees have compiled their own tenant registers and created email distribution lists, Facebook, or WhatsApp groups. The service has confidence in SLRs disseminating our messaging to their tenant groups. Furthermore, work to improve e-mail coverage to all tenants has seen the proportion of tenants for whom records include a working email address leap from 46% in 2020 to 71% in 2022. This has boosted site meeting turn out.
- 4.2.7 The rate of letting new tenancies has increased dramatically. Before the project start, new lettings occurred at a rate of 5 per month. In the last twelve months, our new lettings rate has increased to 14 per month. This increase is due to whole-site overhauls that have brought long-derelect plots back into lettable condition; to SLRs plot-surveys and informal efforts to help absentee tenants to quit along with the Council's firmer and more targeted action on non-conforming tenants; and to SLRs and the service working more efficiently on plot-lettings.
- 4.2.8 Tenants and SLRs report that the Councils increased commitment and activity helps persuade sceptics that there are benefits in self-management. SLRs also report that Council investment is helping to make tenants more accepting that a future rent increase is justified and expected. Some tenants continue to express their concern that some rent levels are set too low to fund an effective service.
- 4.2.9 SLRs and tenants continue to stress that their contributions are dependent on the Council continuing to support their efforts to develop. Sites state that there are tasks that are and will remain beyond their abilities and that responsibility for major infrastructure maintenance and tackling noncompliant tenants should remain with the Council. They have consistently said that the Council must not assume that self-management means it can divest itself of allotment management. They assert that the Council must not expect self-management to grow without advice on governance issues. SLRs also report that any drive by the Council to impose self-management on their sites would be counterproductive. They want to feel their way into new areas of responsibility at their own speed.
- 4.2.10 This paper includes three proposals relating to the Tenancy Management theme.
  - Undertake a consultation on Rent and Discount levels. (Para 4.3 below). The Rent Review aims are to set allotment provision on a firmer financial footing, investigate how we can support households with low incomes, and to help meet the agreed savings target. 5

- Propose, consult on and issue new Conditions to the Tenancy Agreement so it is clearer about rights and responsibilities (see para 4.4 below). This will help plottolders understand what they should do to keep a plot properly and will help the service to uphold the condition.
- Address excessive waste generation on sites and so reduce disposal costs (see Para 4.5 below)

### 4.3 RENT REVIEW

4.3.1 The 2017 budget-setting process proposed the doubling of allotment rents. It was agreed that this be recalculated, factoring in the savings generated through self-management action. It is now proposed that Rent Review will be subject to tenant consultation from January to March 2023, put before HNL Committee for approval and then subject to the 12-month written notice period (1<sup>st</sup> April 2023) before being applied from April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024.

4.3.2 For 2023, it is proposed that Fees and Charges are increased by 4% in line with the annual DEGNS Fees and Charges Schedule for 2023/24. For information, the 2022 and 2023 fees and charges are set out in Tables 1 and 2 below. Note that two discount levels are available, 10% discount for those with Your Reading Passport (YRP), and 84% for those aged 60 and over who have Your Reading Passport.

Table 1. 2022 Rent Matrix showing rent levels by discount and Site Category.

2022 per 25 sqm	Standard Rate	Your Reading Passport Rate	YRP & aged 60 or more
<b>Start-up Fee</b>	£43.39	n/a	n/a
<b>Category A site annual rent</b>	£7.80	£7.00	£1.25
<b>Category B Site annual rent</b>	£5.80	£5.30	£0.85
<b>Category C Site annual rent</b>	£3.90	£3.50	£0.65
<b>% Of all tenancies paying by Rate</b>	64%	12%	24%

Table 2. 2023 Rent Matrix showing rent levels by discount and Site Category.

2023 per 25 sqm	Standard Rate	Your Reading Passport Rate	YRP & aged 60 or more
<b>Start-up Fee</b>	£45.10	n/a	n/a
<b>Category A site annual rent</b>	£8.10	£7.30	£1.30
<b>Category B Site annual rent</b>	£6.00	£5.50	£1.00
<b>Category C Site annual rent</b>	£4.10	£3.60	£0.70

4.3.4 In calculating reasonable rent for allotments, landlords are recommended to benchmark rates against other providers. Rent levels for 2021/22 have been assessed at sites managed by Local Authorities in the Southeast, Parish and Town Councils in Berkshire, and private providers within Reading Borough. The exercise found a mean rent level charged for standard (non-discounted) plots in 2021/22 to be £8.60 per 25 sqm, 40 pence higher than charged by Reading Borough Council in 2022. The landlords studied were:

- **£9.00** per 25 sqm for Slough, Windsor & Maidenhead, Basingstoke, Guildford, London Councils, Milton Keynes, & Southampton Councils.
- **£7.50** per 25 sqm for Parish & Town Councils in Berkshire.

- **£12.00** per 25 sqm at Tilehurst Poor Lands (private charity-run site within Reading Borough)
- For reference only and not included in benchmarking calculations, Roots Allotments charge £138.60 per 25 sqm. Roots Allotments are a new business that offers a more expansive service than traditional allotment providers. They have sites in Bath and Bristol, are planning a new site in Wokingham and have expressed interest in setting up a site in Reading.

The Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) reports that in 2022, two-thirds of allotment providers are continuing to or plan to increase rents. Based on benchmarking, and considering service needs, it is not proposed to set new rents higher than the current benchmark average or the expected 2024/25 benchmark level.

#### 4.3.5 Factors to be considered in setting rents for 2024/25 are as follows,

- Whether an increase is considered to be ‘significant’ and that would be subject to consideration under section of the 10 Allotments Act 1950 and the Consumer Rights Act 2015. s10 Allotments Act 1950 states that allotments shall be let at such rent as a tenant may reasonably be expected to pay.
- Mitigating the negative impact of rent increases on the least able to pay.
- Timing of agreed rent increases in terms of the required notice period and the current cost of living crisis.
- Setting the service on a robust financial footing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and contributing to service savings needed, especially when combined with efficiency derived from self-management.
- Valuation of Allotments to decide what tenants would be expected to pay. Use of ‘agricultural rent’ as a comparison. Legal Services advise that the Council values allotment sites at £0.
- Benchmarking against rent levels at other sites.
- Comparing ‘subsidy’ value against other similar subsidised Council services. The APSE ‘State of the Market report 2022 found that two-thirds of providers continue to subsidise allotment services from other budgets. *Harwood v Borough of Reigate and Banstead* (1982) held that Local Authorities did not have to subsidise the provision of allotments. Reading’s allotments are heavily subsidised with annual allotment income of £45,000 and normal running costs of £85,000. Costs have been higher from 2021 till now because of the recruitment of the Project Officer and because of waste costs arising from the programme of whole-site overhauls. Rent increase, uptake of self-management and proposals to reduce waste disposal costs will all combine to shrink the subsidy gap but will not result in a cost-neutral service.
- Reinvestment of increased rent income in allotment infrastructure and support for Allotment Societies.

#### 4.3.6 The Rent Review Consultation will follow the same successful method of the 2020 Allotment Consultation. Site Liaison Representatives and volunteers who were not in place in 2020 will enhance the reach of consultation.

#### 4.4 **TENANCY MANAGEMENT - REVIEW OF TENANCY AGREEMENT CONDITIONS AND ALLOTMENT YEAR START DATE**

Overall approval to amend and strengthen the current Tenancy Agreement conditions is supported through soft consultation discussions with SLRs and at site meetings.

4.4.1 It is proposed that current Tenancy Agreement conditions (see Appendix B) are replaced by new conditions, subject to Legal Services approval, set out in draft, subject to the Legal Services sign-off (at Appendix C). The new conditions provide clarity of the responsibilities and rights of the 21<sup>st</sup> century plot-holder and landlord. Key changes include

- Minimum plot cultivation requirements, as a percentage of plot size.
- Inclusion of anti-social behaviour or criminality as grounds for eviction.
- Limits on maximum height of newly planted fruit trees and a ban on planting of non-crop amenity trees on plots.
- Banning the use of carpet as a ground cover. Carpets are harmful to soil health, are often difficult to remove and are costly to dispose of.
- Banning the use of tyres due to their environmental impact and disposal cost.
- Maximum proportion of plot area that can be used for storage of materials or left under cover for more than one season.
- Outline guidance about responsibilities that are shared between Allotment Societies and the Council on matters such as tenant disputes, etc.

4.4.2 The new Agreements will be applied to new tenancies from the April after the completion of the 12 month notice period, proposed for April 2024. The Council will notify Allotment Societies, Site Liaison Reps (SLRs) and tenants that the proposed new Conditions will be posted on the new Allotment webpage in January 2023. Hard copies will be given to SLRs to distribute to the digitally excluded. The Council will receive collective feedback from the Allotment Societies and from SLRs.

4.4.3 Changing the start date of the rental year is a ‘significant’ change to the terms of the tenancy agreement. There is no statutory requirement that the Council consult on such a change, but they must give tenants 12 months’ written notice of the proposed change and it is good practice to listen to the opinions of stakeholders. Tenants will therefore be given informal notice of the proposed change through annual rent invoices in December 2022, then through the formal 12 month notice period as above.

4.4.3 The following changes to operation of the Waiting List are proposed with from April 1<sup>st</sup> 2023:

- **Applicants to choose their three preferred sites.** At present, applicants can choose “Any Site” as their preferred option. This creates a complex and unrealistic waiting list. Tenants sometimes take a plot far from their home requiring a car journey each time they visit the plot.
- **Priority Order.** Waiting lists run by date of application only. It is proposed that priority is given first to Reading Borough residents, then their proximity to the sites applied for (based on post code stems RG1, RG2, RG30, RG31, RG4 and RG6) and then by date of application. As such, Out-of-Borough residents are would only be likely to reach the top of the waiting list during a period of low-demand for plots. An exception will be made for Bulmershe Allotments (in Earley - Wokingham BC) where proximity will be based on post code stems RG1, RG5 and RG6.
- **One-Plot Only Policy.** There are many current tenants renting two or more plots. When plots are surrendered, they will be remarked to 125 sqm and relet as individual plots. No new tenant will be granted tenancies to more than one-plot.

## 4.5 WASTE MINIMISATION & MANAGEMENT

4.5.1 Allotment waste collection and disposal is expensive and wasteful. Plotholders are supposed to dispose of their own plot waste lawfully, either in green waste areas (where provided), through on-plot composting, or at the Smallmead Recycling Facility. Some sites have designated waste areas/bays, green waste bays that are generally found to be contaminated, and informal dumping areas on tracks, boundaries, and other communal areas. Waste arises from the following sources:

- A. **Plot waste from worked plots.** Green/organic in the main, but often inorganic. Tenants bring in many materials to build their plots. These include metals, plastics (sheeting, pots, etc), glass and double-glazed windows and doors, tyres, timber, paving slabs and bricks, sheds, greenhouses, household and garden furniture, trailers, washing machines, fish-tanks, oil drums, header tanks, etc.
- B. **Waste brought in by tenants or by fly-tippers.** It is not possible to find who is culpable in each case. Items found on sites this year include broken furniture, domestic and garden waste, building materials, asbestos sheets, toilet bowls, white goods, car parts, broken power tools, etc.
- C. **Plot and communal area waste generated by the service during site maintenance and plot clearance.** The service is clearly responsible for managing its own waste arisings from works on communal areas such as hedges, trees, tracks, and fences. However, the main source of service-derived waste since 2021 has been in the clearance of abandoned plots. Some do not resemble allotment plots as they have been lost to materials and undergrowth accumulated by the former tenant over many years. One plot yielded 3 tonnes of mixed waste, costing £540 in tippage fees plus staff time/on-costs and fuel. As it is unacceptable to let overgrown/cluttered plots to new tenants, it must be cleared. Over 100 plots were cleared in 2022.

4.5.2 There were mixed feelings in the 2020 Consultation about site waste provisions. Some see it as unacceptable to expect free waste services when tenants are supposed to manage their own waste and in the light of austerity. Others were vociferous in objections that, 'we've always had a waste taken away, it's what we pay rent for.' This belief does not recognise that waste collection is not a right set in the Tenancy Agreement; that the Tenancy Agreement says no waste should be dumped elsewhere on site; or that the task may be free of charge to the tenant, but that all other Council Taxpayers will pay for plotholder waste to be disposed of.

4.5.3 It is proposed that the following steps be implemented through 2022/23 to reduce waste generation on sites:

- **Promote on-plot composting.** Some sites have composting champions who help educate other tenants.
- **Promote on-site composting** through the installation of green/compostable waste composting bays. These will not be emptied by the Council but will be managed by volunteers on site to create compost to return to plots.

- **Improve site security.** With volunteer help, the service is changing site padlocks and keys periodically to maintain the security of the site. Secondly, the service is stressing the importance of keeping gates always locked. This task is often overlooked and thus allows in fly-tippers. Once plotholders realise they are liable for their own site waste disposal, site security will improve. Gate locking will be explicitly referenced in the revised Tenancy Agreement.
  - **Introduce waste collection charges.** When the service collects tenants' plot waste, weighbridge readings are used to calculate the tippage costs by site. The annual site waste cost is divided by the number of plots to give a pro-rata Waste Levy that will be added to annual Rent Invoices for each tenant.
  - **Charging for clearance of plots in poor condition.** The current Tenancy Agreement has provisions for the Council to require a plot to be cleared by a departing tenant. If the tenant does not clear the plot, the Council may clear it and recover costs from the outgoing tenant. This clause has not been implemented. From January 2023, the clause will be applied in all circumstances, while taking into consideration special cases such as the death or move into care of the tenant.
- 4.5.4 The "APSE State of the Market" Report 2022 found that only half of all allotment providers offer free waste collection. The feasibility and impact of the waste proposals were discussed with Site Representatives, site meetings, the National Allotment Society and Allotment Societies outside Reading. At site meetings, few tenants expressed an appetite for such an approach, but through deeper discussion it was agreed that something must be done to reduce waste generation. Scours Lane Association have announced they will become a zero-waste site, subject to the Council still removing its own waste arisings. External sites said that their fear that the removal of free waste collection would lead to an increase in on-site dumping proved incorrect. They suggest that, aside of some poor tenant behaviour initially, on site waste management improved because of provision of composting facilities, through peer pressure and to avoid increased charges.
- 4.5.5 Based on waste collection costs since October 2021, the Waste Levy per tenant across the 20 sites is estimated to be £14 per plot. An exercise to estimate the cost per site is underway, but early indications are that some sites might incur a Waste Levy of £5 per plot a year and others £18. The National Allotment Society recommend it is wise to consult on proposed waste charges, despite such charges falling outside of the rent assessment. It is therefore proposed that Waste Levy arrangements are not brought in until the year beginning 2024/25. This delay allows for Council give notice and consult, to install on-site composting bays and embark on a waste minimisation awareness programme with site volunteers. It also gives time for tenants to prepare for new arrangements.
- 4.5.6 Ideally, this approach which includes co-produced solutions could mean the end of waste collection and its associated costs, but the Council may still offer planned one-off collections when carrying out site-maintenance on site. During the first clearances, tenants were offered a plot waste amnesty, allowing them to add their accumulated rubbish for removal.

## **4.6 SITE MAINTENANCE PLAN**

- 4.6.1 The Site Maintenance Plan is held within the Streetscene service. Major site works are restricted to the winter when the Grounds Team have completed their summer programme. However, Henley Road and Lower Southcote (Brunel Road) saw some major works this summer. Most sites were overhauled in the last two winters, with some ad hoc or preliminary works being carried out on others this summer. Those in need of works this winter are Balmore (revisit), Bulmershe (whole-site overhaul), Caversham Court (minor overhaul), Coley (whole-site overhaul), Oak Tree Road (whole-site overhaul), Victoria Road (revisit), Waterloo Meadows (whole-site overhaul). Whole-site works at Bulmershe and at Oak Tree Road will place significant workloads on the Grounds Team because these sites are large and in extremely poor condition. This winter's works are currently 7 weeks behind schedule due to the persistent wet weather being experienced, which may result in some site overhauls being postponed to winter 2023.
- 4.6.2 Tenants and SLRs on sites that have not been subject to overhauls have expressed concern that their sites have been overlooked and that they are currently less inclined to even discuss, let alone adopt any self-management potential. At the recent first Bulmershe site meeting, attendees were initially reluctant to commit to tasks they said were the Council's responsibility. However, the meeting steadily grew and ended on optimistic terms and with a firm commitment to collaborative working through this winter's proposed whole-site overhaul.
- 4.6.3 There have been many examples of minor works being carried out by volunteer work parties on sites. These grow more productive and ambitious once tenants see the Council overhauling their sites after years of under-investment.

## **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 improve 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 check 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. Calculating site waste tonnage and potential pro-rata Waste Levies will continue through 2023. As tenants learn to dispose of their own waste, tenant trips to recycling centres will increase.
- Transport - As maintenance is gradually taken over by tenant's 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 and direction of the Allotment Plans is the 2020 Allotment Consultation Report and is updated through ongoing dialogue with existing and emerging allotment committees and societies.

7.2 Ongoing feedback is gathered through service requests, site meetings and discussions with Site Liaison Representatives (in person, phone and through the SLR e-mail group).

7.3 Site Liaison Reps have reported that Council input to date has helped them develop more on-site collaborative approaches and goodwill towards the service. They also convey their gratitude for the Project and for what the Council has achieved given resource constraints.

7.4 Site Liaison Representatives, Committees and elected Allotment Societies are growing in confidence and now offer suggestions and solutions to problems and are more willing to develop and trial their own policies and approaches.

7.5 Though the overhaul of the Allotment webpage is delayed, it will be operational before 2023 and will become another conduit for two-way engagement through a suggestions section and through direction to on-line consultation material.

## **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 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 10<sup>th</sup> November 2021. "Allotments Self-Management"

11.2 Appendix A - Allotment Action Plan 2022

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