

Policy Committee

11 March 2024



Reading
Borough Council
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Title	Allotment Rent Review Consultation Update
Purpose of the report	To make a decision
Report status	Public report
Report author	Chris Wheeler, Assistant Director Environmental and Commercial Services
Lead Councillor	Councillor Karen Rowland, Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety
Corporate priority	Healthy Environment
Recommendations	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. That Members note the findings of the Allotment Survey 2023 and approve the proposed increases in allotment rents and reductions in discounts found in Option B, Para 1.1. Plotholders will be given 12 months' written notice of the changes in March 2024 and the changes will be implemented in April 2025.2. That Members approve the proposed Allotment Rent pricing structure.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Housing, Neighbourhoods and Leisure Committee of 6th July 2023 approved plans to survey stakeholders on two proposals.

Option A.

- Retain the 10% Your Reading Passport (YRP) General Discount.
- Reduce the 84% YRP Concessionary Discount to 40%
- Fix rent increases for 2025 and 2026 to 4%.

Option B.

- Remove the 10% YRP General Discount.
- Reduce the 84% YRP Concessionary Discount to 40%.
- Increase rents by approximately 20% to align to benchmarked rent for 2025.

1.2 The Survey was conducted in November and December 2023. Respondents were strongly supportive of **Option B**. The proposals have been guided by the principles of the annual Fees and Charges Setting process and by guidance and case law set out in the report.

1.3 **Option B** will see rents and discounts on Reading Borough Council's allotment sites align with levels within other Authorities as determined through a benchmarking exercise.

2. POLICY CONTEXT

2.1 Reading Borough Council administer 20 allotment sites throughout the Borough, with 1,321 plotholders current working 1451 plots. All sites have historically been directly managed by the Council, however, in 2021 the allotment self-management project began to develop capacity to allow more allotment site autonomy. Since 2021 the

service has also been conducting an overhaul of site infrastructure and administrative systems.

- 2.2 Under Section 23 of the Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908, a Council has a statutory duty to provide sufficient allotments, to residents who want to cultivate, and harvest produce.
- 2.3 This proposal aims to deliver a balanced and affordable budget that ensures the Council’s finances are sustainable over the medium and longer term. The Council’s Vision informs the Strategy: “to ensure that Reading realises its potential – and that everyone who lives and works in Reading can share in the benefits of its success.”
- 2.4 Factors that were considered when proposing and setting new rent/discounts levels are set out in full in paragraphs 4.2.7 to 4.3.6 of the HNL report, “Allotments – Fees and Charges Review,” 6th July 2023.

3. THE PROPOSAL

3.1 CURRENT RENT LEVELS

- Rents vary by site depending on coverage of water supply.
- Rental income is also variable depending on whether the tenant receives one of the two available discounts offered.
- Discounts are either General or Concessionary available to tenants with a YRP.

Table 1 below sets out the current (2024) Rent Matrix for plots of 125sqm.

Site Category	Annual Fee	Annual Fee with 10% YRP Discount	Annual Fee with 84% YRP Discount
A. Water supply across site	£45.00 £0.87p/w	£40.50 £0.78p/w	£7.50 £0.14p/w
B. Partial water supply on site	£32.50 £0.63p/w	£29.25 £0.56p/w	£5.50 £0.11p/w
C. No water supply	£22.50 £0.43p/w	£20.25 £0.39p/w	£3.75 £0.07p/w
Tenants on full fee or discount	891	114	316
Total No. of Tenants	1321		

- 3.2 Plotholders with a YRP can claim either of the two discounts, subject to their circumstances, as follows:
- **YRP General Discount (10%).** Available to adult residents of the Borough.
 - **YRP Concessionary Discount (84%).** Available to YRP holders who are aged 60+, on low income or with a disability.

Of the current 1,321 allotment tenants, 430 (33%) claim one of the two discounts.

Proposed within the Fees and Charges Setting Process for 2024/25, allotment rental income for the calendar year 2024 is projected to be £46,000. The annual cost of providing site infrastructure (fencing, gates, locks etc.) together with water charges and administration costs in a normal year is approximately £85,000.

3.3 SETTING A NEW RENT/DISCOUNT STRUCTURE.

HNL Committee of 6 July 2023 approved plans to seek stakeholder opinion on two rent/discount proposals.

Option A.

- Retain the 10% YRP General Discount.

- Reduce the 84% YRP Concessionary Discount to 40%.
- Fix rent increases for 2025 and 2026 to 4%.

Option B.

- Scrap the 10% YRP General Discount.
- Reduce the 84% YRP Concessionary Discount to 40%.
- Increase rents by approximately 20% to align to benchmarked rent for 2025.

3.5 Table 2. **Option B** for the recommended increase for plots of 125sqm.

Site Category	2023 Annual Fee	2025 Annual Fee	Increase £
A	£45.00 £0.87p/w	£50.50 £0.97p/w	£5.50 £0.10p/w
B	£32.50 £0.63p/w	£37.88 £0.73p/w	£5.38 £0.10p/w
C	£22.50 £0.43p/w	£25.25 £0.49p/w	£2.75 £0.05p/w
Category	2023 Annual Fee with 10% Discount	2025 Annual Fee	Increase £
A	£40.50 £0.78p/w	£50.50 £0.97p/w	£10.00 £0.19p/w
B	£29.25 £0.56p/w	£37.88 £0.78p/w	£8.63 £0.17p/w
C	£20.25 £0.39p/w	£25.25 £0.49p/w	£5.00 £0.10p/w
Category	2023 Annual Fee with YRP 84% Discount	2025 Annual Fee with 40% Discount	Increase £
A	£7.50 £0.14p/w	£30.30 £0.58p/w	£22.80 £0.44p/w
B	£5.50 £0.11p/w	£22.73 £0.44p/w	£17.23 £0.33p/w
C	£3.75 £0.07p/w	£15.15 £0.29p/w	£11.40 £0.22p/w

4. ALLOTMENT SURVEY - WINTER 2023.

4.1 All ploholders and those on the waiting list were consulted in the form of an allotment survey. Within the survey the following were considered:

- Adoption of a single discount offered to those in greatest financial need.
- Discounts offered to all categories of ploholders.
- Ensuring people in need would not be excluded from the proposed changes.
- Measures to verify qualification eligibility for Discount.

4.2 Analysis of the survey feedback showed that 550 of the 1321 current potholders 74% were in favour of ceasing the 10% General Discount and 68% were in favour of reducing the 84% Concessionary Discount to 40%. The survey and detailed analysis are shown in Appendix A.

4.3 It is therefore recommended within **Option B**:

- The 10% YRP General Discount is withdrawn.
- That the link between the new discount and YRP is ended.

- That the concessionary discount is reduced from 84% to 40% and eligibility to the concessionary rate is as set out in table below.

Table 3. Concessionary rate eligibility.

	Low-income	Disability	Age
Eligibility Criteria	Any of- Housing Benefit Council Tax Support	Blue Badge Bus Pass	State Retirement Pension Age-linked Bus Pass
Proof required. NB. In addition to name, address, contact details	For HB/CTS - Date of birth, NI No.	Blue Badge or Bus Pass	Date of birth and NI No. and/or Age-linked Bus Pass
Maximum RBC Population	9,000	5,500	15,000
Verification of claims	Customers provide “consent to check” at application stage and in 2024 review of all current tenancies. Periodic SAMPLE checks on in-house datasets (Academy; Blue Badge Digital Service; or the Bus Pass register (ESP)).		

5 CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

5.1 It is clear from customer feedback that significant majorities experience the Healthy Environment and Thriving Communities themes. Plotholders were asked what their motivations were for having an allotment.

The responses were as follows:

- 84% for outdoor exercise and physical health.
- 83% for mental wellbeing.
- 53% for a sense of community.
- 77% to enjoy or share with others freshly grown food.
- 21% because I have no garden at home.
- 38% to save money on grocery bills.

Feedback on the economic importance of having an allotment was less decisive. The Survey asked how much money people saved per year on their allotments. The responses were:

- 22% saved about £100 p/a.
- 12% saved about £500 p/a.
- 3% saved about £1,000 p/a
- 1% saved about £1,500 p/a.
- 61% did not know how much they saved a year.

Given the National Allotment Society believes that a fully productive allotment can save the plotholder over £2,000 a year on their grocery bills, it is less clear from the survey that Reading plotholders work their plots purely for economic reasons.

5.2 The service aims to meet themes of the ‘Our Foundations’ themes in the following ways. The Allotment Self-Management Project and these themes are underpinned by “Our Foundations” explaining the ways we work at the Council:

- **People first.** The effort taken in the 2020 and 2023 Allotment Surveys emphasise how much the emphasis on stakeholder opinion demonstrates how much more the service places ‘People first’.
- **Digital transformation.** The service recognises the critical part that improved data management and digital dialogue plays in modernisation.
- **Building self-reliance.** The central principle of the Allotment Self-Management Project has been to co-produce ways of building on-site autonomy.

- **Getting the best value.** Changing the rent/discount structure has been a service priority since 2017. With a more appropriate rent income, sites and systems can be further improved. This generates better goodwill and volunteer effort on site that in turn saves the Council money.
- **Collaborating with others.** The service has been changing its approach from reactively doing what it could, to working up plans and conducting works in partnership with allotment volunteers. This has for most sites, embedded well and improved the overall allotment experience for users.

6 ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The proposals have no direct or immediate sustainable development impacts. However, the Survey does form the starting point for the development of waste minimisation and other environmentally themed policies for the future. It is hoped that this drive will not just be limited to questions of waste but will also include allotment water conservation; herbicide/pesticide use; the use of bonfires; and biodiversity-boosting action.

7 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- 7.1 The Allotment Survey on rents/discounts was not a statutory requirement but was regarded as both good practice and an opportunity to ensure stakeholders are more fully informed of the challenges faced when running an allotment service in a period of extreme austerity. The quantity and breadth of feedback from the Survey has been central to reaching the proposals put forward in this paper.

8 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The survey was mainly conducted via email and online but for those with no email, we sent hard copy forms. Site volunteers distributed further hard copy forms among their fellow ploholders and helped those who needed help to complete the forms. The proposals arising in the report will impact on low-income households but have no differential impact of people because of any specific protected characteristic. The Survey asked no protected characteristic related questions.

9 OTHER RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

- 9.1 **GDPR.** As more sites take on more on-site communication, any tenant information shared between the Council and a site committee can only proceed if the customer has consented to the sharing of data.

10 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 Section 10(1), Allotments Act (1950) and the principles of “Harwood v Borough of Reigate and Banstead” 1981 have been observed in arriving at a fair rent level. The levels or approval and disapproval suggest that the risk of legal challenge to a change in rent might be slight.
- 10.2 The proposal includes the introduction of a new Tenancy Agreement. This has the effect of ending the current Tenancy Agreement and starting all current tenants on a new Tenancy Agreement. Section 1 of the Allotment Act 1950 requires that a landlord must give tenants 12 months written notice of end of an allotment tenancy. This provision also applies when introducing “significant” rent increases.

11 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

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

11.1 Revenue Implications

This table set out the revenue implications:

	2023/24 £000	2024/25 £000	2025/26 £000
Running Costs	£27,500	£28,500	£29,500
Staffing Costs	£57,500	£59,500	£61,500
Expenditure	£85,000	£88,000	£91,000
Income from: Fees and charges	-£39,000 (2023)	-£46,000 (2024)	-£58,000
Total Income	-£39,000	-£46,000	-£58,000
Net Cost (+)/saving (-)	£46,000	£42,000	£33,000

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

11.2 **Capital Implications**

There are no Capital implications.

11.3 **Value for Money (VFM)**

Full details of benchmarking against other allotment providers and against other leisure activities can be found in section 4 of the July 2023 HNL Allotment Report.

11.4 **Risk Assessment.**

Negligible financial risk. Survey confirms backing for the rent increase, however, if there were any disenfranchised plotholders who wish to end their tenancy, this can be resolved by allocation to the several hundred people on the waiting list for allotment plots.

12 **TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

DATE	
14/3/24	Write to all current tenants giving 12 months' notice of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change of the start of allotment rent year from January to April. • Rent levels for April 2025. • Closure of current YRP linked Discounts from April 2025, ending of the 10% General Discount. • Severing link between Discounts and YRP • Creation of single "Concession" of 40% based on eligibility set out in Option B para. 3.3 above.
1/4/24	For new tenancy only apply new single "Concession" from 1 April 2024.
12/12/24	Invoice current tenants at 2024 rent levels for Jan-March 2025. Seek confirmation from current tenants they wish to continue to rent their plot and invite tenants to apply for the new Concession where eligible. Update of Site Registers in readiness for April 2025 invoicing.

13 **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

None

APPENDIX A – ALLOTMENT SURVEY

Plotholder opinion was sought through November and December 2023, per section 4 the HNL report, “Allotments – Fees and Charges Review”, 6th July 2023.

- 550 responses were received, including 7 ‘collective site’ responses, and 76 from people on waiting lists.
- This high response rate is a testament to Site Liaison Representatives (SLRs) who broadcast the survey via their own on-site efforts.
- The survey asked for opinions of:
 - The rent/discount proposals.
 - Motivation for having a plot.
 - Ideas to reduce the amount of plot waste generated and disposed of.
 - The success or failures of Allotment Self-Management.

Responses were broadly representative in that all sites provided feedback from at least 30% of tenants and the breakdown of those with discounts reflects the proportion across all tenants.

SURVEY QUESTIONS ABOUT REDUCTION IN DISCOUNTS

REDUCTION IN DISCOUNTS Of those that expressed an opinion	AGREE	DISAGREE
Scrap the 10% YRP General Discount?	74%	26%
Reduce the YRP Concessionary Discount from 84% to 40%?	68%	32%
<p>ANALYSIS. 33% of all current tenants have one of the YRP linked Discounts (9% and 24%, General and Concessionary, respectively). Therefore, it is assumed that 36% of respondents disagreed with any erosion of their discounts, but this was not the case.</p> <p>Of those with General Discount who expressed an opinion, 50% agreed to scrapping the General discount and 68% agreed to the proposed reduction in the Concessionary Discount.</p> <p>Of those with Concessionary Discount who expressed an opinion, 66% agreed to the reduction in the Concessionary Discount rate and 71% agreed to the proposal to scrap the 10% General Discount.</p> <p>CONCLUSIONS. The assumption that discounts are essential to their beneficiaries is challenged by the feedback of those very beneficiaries.</p> <p>There is strong support to scrap the General Discount and to reduce the Concessionary Discount to 40%.</p>		

OPTION A AND OPTION B RESPONSES AND COMPARISON

SURVEY QUESTIONS ABOUT OPTIONS A AND B	AGREE	DISAGREE
<p>Will OPTION A offer value for money and support service improvement? Retain the 10% YRP General Discount; reduce the 84% YRP Concessionary Discount to 40%; and fix rent increases for 2025 and 2026 at 4%.</p> <p>(Respondents who pay Full Charge)</p> <p>(Respondents who have either Discount)</p>	<p>64%</p> <p>(64%)</p> <p>(64%)</p>	<p>36%</p> <p>(36%)</p> <p>(36%)</p>
<p>Will OPTION B offer value for money and support service improvement? Scrap the 10% YRP General Discount, reduce the 84% YRP Concessionary Discount to 40%; increase rents by approximately 20% to align with benchmarked rent for 2025.</p> <p>(Respondents who pay Full Charge)</p> <p>(Respondents who have either Discount)</p>	<p>71%</p> <p>(72%)</p> <p>(69%)</p>	<p>29%</p> <p>(28%)</p> <p>(31%)</p>

ANALYSIS.

Prior to analysis of responses to Options A and B, it is worth noting feedback to another question about the palatability and purpose of rent increases. In it we asked tenants to tick as many of the following options that they agreed with.

The Council should:	No	%
1. Increase rent levels in line with inflation each year.	182	33%
2. Increase rent levels to fund improvements in the service provided to ploholders.	164	30%
3. Set a higher rent increase in 2025 to fund improvements, then stick to a lower rate of increase in following years.	150	27%
4. Increase rent levels so that annual rent income covers the annual cost of running the allotment service.	129	23%
5. Not increase rent levels at all.	95	17%
6. Increase rent levels at the same fixed rate for the next 5 years.	52	9%

All options involving increasing rents (i-iii) receive more approval than the “no rent increases at all” answer (vi).

Question 1, 2 and 6 could be interpreted as meaning the same thing. In other Local Authority rent increase surveys, tenants generally prefer planned annual increases set for 3 to 5 years ahead rather than have a new variable rent increase imposed each year.

In this survey, the **Option B** Rent/Discount proposal is most closely aligned with the wording of Question 3 above.

A final but important finding in this sub-question was that 40% of respondents agreed that the “contributions and savings made by Allotment Societies and site volunteers in any increase in rent levels”. Though beyond the scope of this report, the Council should consider how best to reward sites that take on Self-Management roles, through the rent-setting mechanism for 2026/27.

Returning to Options A and B, **Option B** would lead to greater increases in rents and reduced discounts for more tenants than Option A. Despite this, there is 5% more agreement with and 7% less disagreement with **Option B** than Option A. This would

indicate that respondents feel the proposed rent/discount changes still offer them value for money and will help continue to improve management and condition of sites.

There are several factors that have led to respondents being broadly acceptive of the need to increase rents and reduce discounts. The survey form contained a clear rationale for the proposals; the service has made major efforts to discuss and explain the situation with Site Reps, at Allotment committee meetings and in discussion with plotholders whilst working on sites. The service is particularly grateful to the Site Reps and volunteers who were more informed of the rationale for change and so able to disseminate the rationale among their fellow plotholders.

CONCLUSIONS.

Proposals to increase rents and reduce discounts will never be universally welcomed by allotment users but the survey found greater levels of support for change than for the status quo. Furthermore, levels of support for **Option B** were greater than those for the less costly (to customers) Option A. It is therefore proposed that **Option B** be implemented.

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

The doubling of rents proposed in the 2017 budget-setting process was rejected due to its adverse effect on low-income households.

The status quo (do nothing) was rejected as financially unviable at HNL 6th July 2023.

SURVEY QUESTIONS ABOUT VALUE FOR MONEY & SERVICE IMPROVEMENT

VALUE FOR MONEY & SERVICE IMPROVEMENT	AGREE	DISAGREE
Of those that expressed an opinion		
Does/will your plot offer value for money at current rent/discount levels?	90%	10%
Have you seen improvements in your site in the last 2 years?	66%	33%

ANALYSIS.

Asking how much plotholders value their plots now helped them to evaluate higher proposed rents and gives the Council an indicator of current customer satisfaction.

We asked about improvements/deterioration seen since 2021 to assess the impact of the Allotment Self-Management Project.

It is encouraging that 90% of respondents perceive having an allotment is currently good value for money and that 66% have noticed improvements on site. The improvement in site conditions and management is not just down to the Council. The efforts of volunteers, site representatives and committees have been critical and are to be commended.

The service should note and/or address the following findings.

- More than 80% of Bulmershe and Caversham Court plotholders have seen deterioration or no improvement in their sites.
- The most commonly suggested improvements desired were around better communication on-site and with the Council; better management of waiting lists; faster letting times and shorter vacancy times; poor tenants being evicted, and their plots cleared; overall tidiness of site; faster responses to requests for repairs; increased community-feel; fewer waste piles and fly-tipping; Committee and Council working together well.
- The most common suggested improvements were for quicker lettings, reduced waiting lists and plot vacancy times; more robust action against tenants who do not

work their plot; fix fences, tracks, parking areas and water supplies; on-site composting bays; more green waste collection; repairs to tracks; routine grass/hedge-cutting; improve site security.

- 70% of tenants who live outside the Borough said they do not get good value for money. Note that discounts are not available to non-RBC residents.
- 95% of those on the waiting list believe that current rents offer good value for money.

“VALUE FOR MONEY” CONCLUSIONS

If ‘good value’ is an indicator of customer satisfaction, the results are positive. Of those who said their plot was good value for money, 203 went on to list improvements they have seen. This relationship was strongest on sites where self-management is most vibrant and weakest on sites with minimal or no aspects of self-management.

There were 299 respondents that suggested further improvements. 160 tenants listed improvements they had seen and suggested further improvements. Although this could suggest that service efforts have been insufficient, it may more likely indicate that they have greater faith their suggestions will be actioned because they have seen evidence of improvement steps taken over the last several years by the Council.