

NEWCASTLE – UNDER-LYME BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report To: Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

TITLE: Review of Allotment Service

Submitted by: Head of Operations – Roger Tait

Portfolio: Environment and Recycling

Wards Affected: All

Purpose of the Report

To report the outcome of the work of the Allotments Review Task and Finish Group to the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

To present the draft Allotments Policy to the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Recommendations

That the report is received.

That the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee endorse the findings of the Allotments Review Task and Finish Group and officer recommendations. and that the draft Allotments Policy is approved for consultation.

That a report is brought to a future meeting of Cabinet, recommending that the findings of the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee are accepted and that the draft Allotments Policy is approved for consultation.

Reasons

To update the Allotments Policy and improve the management of the Allotment Service provided by the council.

1. Background

1.1 The Borough Council's Allotment Policy was last reviewed in 1989/90. There have been significant changes in a number of factors affecting the demand for allotments and the way allotments are provided and managed since this time, meaning that the policy is now no longer fit for purpose.

1.2 A report regarding a proposed review of the allotments service was considered by Cabinet at the meeting on 14th November 2012. It was resolved :

- a) That the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee undertake a review of the issues identified with particular reference to local management, meeting future demand and reducing the current cost.
- b) That a report on the outcome of the scrutiny and consultation process be brought to a future meeting of the cabinet, in conjunction with a draft reviewed Allotments Policy.

1.3 The Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee subsequently set up the Allotments Review Task and Finish Group, comprising 6 members, chaired by the Chair of the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee and supported by officers. Five key issues from the cabinet report were highlighted which were to be investigated by the Task and Finish Group. These were broken down into the following issue and sub headings :

a) Provision:

- Needs assessment
- Local standards
- Current provision and providers
- Demand / waiting lists
- Future provision and providers

b) Management:

- Administration
- Waiting Lists
- Plot sizes
- Tenancy agreements
- Enforcement
- Community Management
- Stewardship

c) Resources:

- Cost to the Council
- Charging policy (subsidy v cost recovery)
- Collection of rent
- Capacity
- Funding

d) Sustainability

- Waste management
- Water
- Toilets
- Biodiversity

e) Marketing

- Benefits
- Health and Well –being
- Barriers
- Consultation
- Partnership

2. Issues

2.1 A work programme and timetable was prepared for the Task and Finish Group covering a list of topics for the group to discuss and a series of presentations by officers. These covered the following dates and subjects :

- January 2013 - Planning meetings (agree work plan and time scale)
- February 2013 - Legal framework and Implications (presentation from legal officer)
- March 2013 - Current cost and charging options (presentation by Community Manager).
- April 2013 - Demands and provision options (presentation by Community manager)
- May 2013 - Consultation (Representatives from other allotment groups and societies)

- June 2013 - Site visits (visit cross section of allotment sites and plots)
- July 2013 - Local Management (Discussions on Options)
- September 2013 - Meeting future demand (discussions on options)
- October 2013 - Reducing current costs (Discussions on options)
- November 2013 - Review and analysis (agree direction of policy)
- December 2013 - Draft report (presentation of draft policy)

The work was completed in December 2013 and officers drafted the proposed policy which is attached to this report at Appendix 1. The following sections provide a summary of the debate and conclusions on each topic.

2.2 Provision:

Needs assessment/local standards/current provision and providers/demand and waiting list/future provision and providers.

- The waiting list was thoroughly reviewed and those on the waiting list were contacted in writing and asked if they wished to remain on the list and to name the site that they wanted to be placed upon. The waiting list had 420 multiple entries and after the review it reduced from 283 to 133 people. The task and finish group recommended that the waiting list should be reviewed every year. This will speed up the process of letting plots and give a realistic waiting list figure. Applicants from outside the borough can be considered for plots but priority is to be given to borough residents.
- Geographical maps were prepared to show the task and finish group the position of the allotment sites, the location of the tenants in relationship to the position of the allotment sites and the position of the residents on the waiting list for that particular site. This exercise showed that there is good local take up from residents who live close to the allotment sites, along with a waiting list of local residents. There were few examples of residents living a great distance from the allotment sites.
- It was recommended by the task and finish group that a basic needs assessment be carried out and local standards for allotment provision be set for Newcastle based on current provision and demand levels shown on the waiting list. The national standard was not considered to be appropriate for Newcastle. Measures are to be put in place to speed up the process of letting and eviction. It was also recommended to engage with other providers to explore shared service potential and to consider additional provision if demand arises and external funding is available. A register of land that is council owned and would be suitable for future allotment sites should be prepared.

2.3 Management:

Administration/waiting list/plot sizes/tenancy agreements/enforcement/community management/stewardship.

- The task and finish group recommended that varying plot sizes and tenancies be offered.
It was recommended that all allotment plots be measured and charged per m² according to the size of the plot, to ensure fairness and consistency.
- The current methods of administering allotment services were examined by the task and finish group. Officers highlighted areas where delays occur with the current process of administration and enforcement and the present tenancy agreements. Changes were proposed in the method of administration by improving systems to make them more efficient. The new proposed tenancy agreement was designed to streamline processes and more robustly manage tenants who do not pay, which

should ultimately reduce overhead costs. Eviction powers could be delegated to allotment associations where they exist and where they are able to manage this process. Assistance from the council can be made available if necessary.

The proposed Tenancy Agreement and Operating Procedure are attached to the draft Allotments Policy as Appendix A and B respectively.

- The task and finish group also recommended that as part of the management of sites, differing community management models are to be considered and progressed where appropriate. Efforts should be made to set up “Allotment Tenants Association Committees” on each of the larger sites and a combined committee for the 3 smaller sites. These committees would be encouraged to affiliate to the National Allotment Society, and to become self sufficient. They would also be encouraged to nominate stewards for each site. This would also allow the allotment site committees to access and apply for local and national funding streams.

2.4 Resources:

Cost to the council/charging policy (subsidy v cost recovery)/collection of rents/capacity/funding

- The task and finish group looked at the cost of the service in detail. It was clear that the overall annual cost of £57,860 for the service balanced against £10,500 income was an area which needed addressing. The cost was broken down into the following areas of expenditure:

- **Premises charges = £31,270**

These cover building repairs, water charges and grounds maintenance works carried out by Streetscene. The group proposed that water charges of £4,500 are to be charged to the allotment tenants as a proportion of the individual allotment site bill. Building repairs charges are reduced from £6,500 - £4,000 Streetscene charges of £18,870 to be reduced by approximately £6000 when two sites are transferred to Silverdale Parish Council. This sum will be reapportioned to another area of work where the capacity is redeployed, so there will be no net saving to the council.

- **Supplies and services charges = £1,550**

These charges cover removal of waste, print room charges, material general, and contribution to unrecovered debts

Within this section of cost, the recommendation from the task and finish group was to cease providing skips for allotment sites ensuring that rubbish was either composted or taken home for disposal by tenants.

- **Support service / capital financing = £25,044**

These charges cover £204 of capital financing, and the remainder of recharges are made by the following teams for officer time spent on allotment related work:

A101	Accountancy	1,000.00
A107	Sundry Debtors	2,540.00
A112	Creditors Section	330.00
A141	Agresso Financial Information System	270.00
A302	Legal Services	1,540.00
A401	Operational Services Admin	910.00
A402	Engineers	1,940.00
A404	Public Buildings	7,080.00
A406	Community Team	9,230.00

	TOTAL	24,840.00
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The group expressed concern that the support charges were close to 50% of the total allotment service cost. Officers were asked to contact the respective Heads of Service to ask for recharges to be reviewed and to see if these charges could be reduced in the light of the proposed changes to the management of the allotment sites and the transfer of two of the allotment sites to Silverdale Parish Council. However, for the purpose of estimating future costs, these charges have been retained at current levels for the time being.

- **Rents - general rents income = £10,500.**

There were two elements to this area which needed to be reviewed, the first being the cost of an allotment plot (current rent for a plot after April 2014 will be £59.00) The group proposed a rise of 20% commencing April 2015 (allowing 12 months notice). This will bring the cost of a full plot to £70.80 and thereafter annual incremental rises are to be implemented to move towards a reduction in subsidy and higher proportion of cost recovery. The second issue related to the income is the level of concessionary rate offered to tenants over 60 years of age and unemployed. The group proposed that the concessionary rate be reduced from 50% to 20% with effect from April 2015.

At current levels of occupation, and taking out the income from the two Silverdale sites which will transfer to the parish council, the increase in rent and reduction in concessions would mean that estimated income for 2015 would increase to approximately £7,300 from £4,900.

- **Collection of rent**

The group considered that it would be operationally effective to improve the system for sending out the annual rent invoices and monitoring payments. The billing period should change from January to April each year with a view that those who have not paid their rent within 28 days will be sent eviction notices in accordance with the revised tenancy agreement. This will streamline the administration process and assist in managing vacant and non-cultivated plots more effectively.

- **Capacity**

The task and finish group decided to recommend that the development of any further allotment sites should be explored if demand arises and if external funding is available. It was suggested that enquires from residents living within parished wards are directed to the respective Parish Councils and that a list of potential future sites within council ownership is prepared so that future demand could be serviced dependent on funding being secured from appropriate sources. It was proposed to monitor the waiting list by reviewing it annually and seeking to relet any plots vacated as quickly as possible.

- **Funding**

The task and finish group proposed the setting up of allotment associations groups for each of the large sites and a combined group for the small sites. The groups will be encouraged to apply for funding for local and national funding sources. Officers will continue to seek to identify potential sources of funding to improve allotment sites or create new sites if demand arises. Engagement with

other potential providers will also take place to explore the possibility of shared services.

2.5 Sustainability:

Waste management/water/toilets/biodiversity

- **Waste management**

To ensure all tenants are held responsible for the amount of rubbish left on the allotment plot when vacating the site, the group decided to include within the tenancy agreement the requirement for tenants to dispose of their own waste and to return a plot in clean order, or the cost will be recharged to the ex-tenant to clear the rubbish left behind. It was also agreed to recommend that all allotment sites had re-cycling bins located if possible to assist with the removal of surplus green waste. All skips for general waste are to be removed from sites as general waste should be disposed of responsibly by the tenant.

- **Water**

The task and finish group looked at the cost of mains water for allotment sites, and decided to follow the route which many other authorities have adopted in that water costs are charged directly to the plot holder as a proportion of the overall site usage. The longer term view of the group is to reduce the provision of water, allowing the respective allotment association committee to determine whether or not their site wants a mains water supply or not, and if so, to be paid for by the tenants. The use of water butts is to be encouraged for plot holders.

- **Toilets**

The task and finish group looked at the cost of the provision of toilets on allotment sites (only two sites have a toilet), and decided that allotment associations should either manage and pay for the cleaning of their toilets if the site has one, or if the allotment association decide that they need to develop a toilet on their site that the allotment association committee fund this and maintain it from their own funds.

- **Biodiversity**

The task and finish group looked at this issue and decided that if individual sites wished to actively encourage biodiversity (such as allotments at Lyme Valley) then this would be supported with the individual allotment association committees.

2.6 Marketing:

Benefits/health and well – being/barriers/consultation/partnership.

- **Benefits / Health and Well-Being**

The task and finish group felt that as there were a number of people on the waiting list, there was not a need to either market the sites or develop additional plans with partners such as the NHS at this moment, although the NHS was considered to be a potential source of future funding if a project was to be developed similar to the Lyme Valley Allotment project. The benefits of allotment gardening should be recognised and included in the Health and Well-being Strategy.

- **Consultation**

The task and finish group met representatives from:

- Parish Council sites at Audley
- National Allotment Association
- The Acre allotment site
- Lyme Valley allotment site
- Dimsdale allotment site

Discussions with the representatives explored areas such as forming allotment associations, issues with the current system of management, rent payment and how this is managed (by Parish tenants), what the tenants hopes for the future are. Many of the areas discussed have been addressed with the new draft policy, tenancy agreement and method of operation.

- **Barriers/ Partnership**

The task and finish group discussed the potential involvement of partners in providing allotment services. While the group considered that there was limited potential at present, the option of developing partnerships in the future should be incorporated into the policy and that opportunities should be explored if and when they arise.

2.7 The above issues have been incorporated into the draft Allotments Policy which is attached to this report at Appendix 1. The policy sets out how allotments will be managed over the next 5 years in line with the findings and recommendations of the Task and Finish Group, including additional officer recommendations relating to technical or operational issues. It includes an action plan setting out specific tasks and timescales to assist in delivering the aims of the policy. The policy will be reviewed annually and a progress report will be brought to appropriate meetings of the cabinet.

2.8 It is proposed that the draft policy be approved for consultation and that a consultation plan be prepared by the Task and Finish Group for recommendation to Cabinet.

3. Proposal

3.1 That the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee endorse the findings of the Allotments Review Task and Finish Group and approve the draft Allotments Policy for consultation.

3.2 That a report is brought to a future meeting of the Cabinet, recommending that the findings of the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee are accepted and that the draft Allotments Policy is approved for consultation.

4. Reasons for proposed solutions

4.1 To update the Allotments Policy and improve the Allotment Service provided by the council.

5. Outcomes linked to Council Plan and Corporate Priorities

5.1 Creating a cleaner, safer and sustainable Borough.

5.2 Creating a healthy and active community

6. Legal and Statutory Implications

6.1 There are a number of legal and statutory implications relating to the provision, maintenance and charging of allotments which were considered during the scrutiny process and policy review.

7. Equality Impact Assessment

7.1 An assessment has been undertaken as part of the review process and this is included at Appendix C

8. Financial and resource implications

8.1 The current net annual cost of the allotment services provided by the council is £47,360. Financial implications have been considered as part of the review process and the Task and Finish Group have made the following recommendations to seek to reduce costs and increase income with a view to closing the gap between service cost and income incrementally each year over the life of the policy:

1. Review support service recharges and request that recharges are reduced/minimised wherever possible
2. Reduce annual spend on repairs, waste removal and phase out subsidised provision of mains water to sites (tenants to pay for mains water as a surcharge on rent)
3. Rationalise and improve systems for administration work, billing etc for allotments.
4. Reduce concession rates from 50% to 20%
5. Increase rents by 20% initially in 2015 and by an agreed percentage each year thereafter for an initial 5 year period.
6. Transfer the two allotment sites in Silverdale to Silverdale Parish Council

8.2 If the above recommendations are approved and adopted as part of the proposed Allotments Policy, it is estimated that the net annual cost of the Allotments Service will reduce to approximately £34,000 in 2015, subject to current occupancy levels being maintained when the higher rents/reduced concessions are implemented. Any subsequent reductions in cost would be subject to further rent increases and minimising internal recharges.

9. Major Risk

9.1 The risk associated with each option has been considered as part of the review process. A full risk assessment has been prepared and is attached at Appendix 2.

10. Key Decision Information

10.1 This initiative impacts on more than 2 wards and has been included in the forward plan.

11. Earlier Cabinet Reports

11.1 Cabinet 30th November 2011
Cabinet 14th November 2012