

DRAFT VERSION 3 – 13th March 2014

NEWCASTLE – UNDER-LYME BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report To: CABINET – 2nd April 2014

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 Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee to the Cabinet.

To present the draft Allotments Policy to the Cabinet.

Recommendations

That the report is received.

That the Cabinet endorses the findings of the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee and that the draft Allotments Policy is approved for consultation.

That a report is brought to a future meeting of the Cabinet, detailing the outcome of the consultation on the draft Allotments Strategy and recommending that the strategy is formally adopted, subject to any changes arising from the consultation responses.

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.

At the meeting of 25th February 2014, the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the work of the Task and Finish Group and resolved to recommend to Cabinet that it's findings be endorsed and that the draft Allotments Strategy be approved for consultation. The Task and Finish Group will prepare a consultation plan for implementation by officers. The report is attached to this report at Appendix 1.

2. Issues

2.1 A summary of the main recommendations for consultation are as follows:

Number	Recommendation
1	That an annual review and rationalisation of the waiting list is carried out
2	That applicants from outside the borough can be considered for plots but priority is to be given to borough residents
3	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
4	That engagement with other providers is carried out to explore shared service potential and to consider additional provision if demand arises and external funding is available
5	That a register of land that is Council owned and would be suitable for future allotment sites should be prepared
6	That varying plot sizes and tenancies be offered
7	That allotment plots be measured and charged per m2 according to the size of the plot
8	That systems are improved to make them more efficient
9	That the proposed Tenancy Agreement and Operating Procedure attached to the draft Allotments Policy as Appendix A and B respectively are approved
10	That differing community management models are to be considered and progressed where appropriate
11	That ploholders are encouraged to set up "Allotment Tenants Association Committees" on each of the larger sites and a combined committee for the 3 smaller sites
12	That the overall annual cost of £57,860 for the service balanced against £10,500 income is reviewed
13	That recharges are to be reviewed and reduced if possible following the proposed changes to management systems and the transfer of two of the allotment sites to Silverdale Parish Council
14	That a rise of £11.80 for a full plot (23p per week) commencing April 2015 (allowing 12 months notice) and thereafter annual incremental rises to move towards a reduction in subsidy and higher proportion of cost recovery is approved
15	That the level of concessionary rate offered to tenants over 60 years of age and unemployed is to be reduced from 50% to 20% with effect from April 2015
16	That the system for sending out the annual rent invoices and monitoring payments is improved. The billing period should change from January to April each year with one annual non-refundable bill
17	That the development of any further allotment sites should be explored if demand arises and if external funding is available
18	That enquires from residents living within parished wards are directed to the respective Parish Councils
19	That it is included 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
20	That all allotment sites have re-cycling bins located if possible to assist with the

	removal of surplus green waste
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Number	Recommendation
21	That all skips for general waste are to be removed from sites as general waste should be disposed of responsibly by the tenant
22	That water costs are charged directly to the plot holder as a proportion of the overall site usage. The use of water butts is to be encouraged for plot holders
23	That allotment associations are to manage and pay for the provision and cleaning of their toilets if required
24	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
25	That there is 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
26	That the benefits of allotment gardening should be recognised and included in the Health and Well-being Strategy
27	That while it is considered that there was limited potential at present, the option of developing partnerships in the future is incorporated into the policy and opportunities will be explored if and when they arise

3.2 The above issues have been incorporated into the draft Allotments Policy which is attached to this report at Appendix 2. The policy sets out how allotments will be managed over the next 5 years in line with the findings and recommendations of the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee. 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.

3.3 It is proposed that the draft policy be approved for consultation and that a consultation plan be prepared by the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

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, detailing the outcome of the consultation on the draft Allotments Strategy and recommending that strategy is formally adopted subject to any changes arising from the consultation process.

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

5.3 Becoming a co-operative council

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 3.

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 Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee 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 £11.80 for a full plot (23p per week) 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 2015/16, 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 3.

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
Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee 25.02.14