

ALLOTMENTS SERVICE – REVIEW OF POLICY ISSUES AND OPTIONS PAPER

Submitted by: Head of Operations – Roger Tait

Portfolio: Culture & Leisure/Environment & Recycling

Ward(s) affected: All

Purpose of the Report

To inform Cabinet of progress with the review of the Allotments Policy and issues which have arisen out of the preliminary work.

To present an issues and options report for Cabinet to consider.

To seek the endorsement of the Cabinet of the identified issues for referral to the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration of the options available to progress the review.

Recommendations

(a) That Cabinet endorse the issues identified in the report.

(b) That the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee be asked to undertake a review of the issues identified with particular reference to local management, meeting future demand and reducing the current cost.

(c) That a report on the outcome of the scrutiny and consultation process is brought to a future meeting of the Cabinet, in conjunction with a draft reviewed Allotments Policy.

Reasons

To update the Allotments Policy and seek to achieve efficiency savings in relation to the cost of providing an allotment service.

1. Background

1.1 There have been significant changes in a number of factors affecting the demand for allotments and the way allotments are provided and managed since the Borough Council's Allotment Policy was last renewed, 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 30 November 2011.

It was resolved:

(a) That a review of the Council's Allotments Policy be carried out, including the consideration of options to reduce the cost of the service and progress local management of allotment sites.

(b) That a report on the outcome of the review, including consultation work and a proposed revised charging structure, be brought to a future meeting of the Cabinet.

- 1.3 Since your meeting, officers have undertaken a number of tasks to gather information, research current trends in the sector and benchmark the service against examples of good practice.
- 1.4 Some initial consultation has also been undertaken with national allotment organisations, other local authorities, APSE and current plot holders in the Borough.
- 1.5 This information has been analysed to identify the current issues affecting the allotment service in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

The following section of this report will list the key issues, and offer options which could be pursued to address them.

2. **Issues**

- 2.1 The key issues can be grouped into 5 broad areas (listed in provisional order of priority), with sub-headings to divide each area into specific topics for consideration as follows:

	Issue	Sub Heading	Comment
1	Provision	Needs assessment	No formal needs assessment has been undertaken
		Local standards	No local standard is currently set. National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners recommend a national standard of 15 plots per 1000 households.
		Current provision and providers	All known providers and total number of plots are listed
		Demand/waiting lists	Waiting lists for other local providers is available
		Future provision and providers	There is no current strategy for future provision although there are some small projects in progress with other local providers
		Plot sizes	Plot sizes are generally large and based on historic system of provision
2	Management	Administration	Administration is currently divided between 2 separate directorates and 3 teams
		Waiting Lists	Waiting lists are managed by the Community Team
		Tenancy agreements	Existing tenancy agreements are outdated and not fit for purpose
		Enforcement	Enforcement of tenancy

		Community management	agreements is currently limited by capacity, dispersed management and outdated process
		Stewardship	Community management is currently in place at one Borough Council site No formal stewardship scheme exists at present
3	Resources	Cost to the Council	The net cost of providing the service is currently approx £40k
		Charging policy (subsidy v cost recovery)	The current approach is to subsidise the provision of allotments. Full cost recovery would involve high increases in rent.
		Collection of rent	Rent collection is carried out by the Revenues and Benefits team. Non payment is pursued by the Community Team but reliant on information provided by the Revenues and Benefits team
		Capacity	There is limited financial and staff resource capacity to develop the service beyond it's current level at present
		Funding	There is limited capital and revenue funding available from any source to invest in improvements and maintenance
4	Sustainability	Waste management	Removal and recycling of waste is mainly undertaken by the Council at present, with some on site composting by plot holders
		Water	Each site has a mains water supply with stand pipes and many plot holders use water butts
		Toilets	Only one site has a toilet at present which is provided and maintained by the Council
		Biodiversity	Some sites have dedicated wildlife gardens but there is generally limited promotion of biodiversity and in some cases, a direct conflict between biodiversity and allotment gardening

5	Promotion	Benefits	There are many benefits to allotment gardening but marketing is constrained by the limited availability of plots
		Health and Well-being	Allotment gardening makes a positive contribution to health and well-being and the scope to develop this should be considered
		Barriers	Barriers include limited plot availability, over large plot sizes, lack of site facilities, fear of crime/ASB/vandalism, site security, site location, travel distance
		Consultation	Annual user satisfaction surveys are carried out but consultation should be expanded to include those on the waiting list and other stakeholders
		Partnership	Partnership opportunities should be explored to determine appetite/capacity

2.2 These issues are broadly similar to those affecting a number of local authorities, other providers and allotment gardeners across England and Wales.

It is considered appropriate to refer the potential options to address these issues to the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee to allow full consideration, debate and recommendations for consultation prior to setting the framework for the reviewed draft strategy.

3. Options Considered

3.1 The following section of the report outlines options which are available to address the issues and poses questions for members of the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee on how they would prefer to proceed.

	Issue	Sub Heading	Option	Questions
1.	Provision	Needs assessment	Carry out basic needs assessment	Do Members wish to carry out a needs assessment and set a local standard for allotment provision?
		Local standards	Develop local standard	
		Current provision and providers	Map existing sites and identify gaps	Do Members wish to engage with other providers to scope options for

		Demand/waiting lists	Map plot holders and applicants on waiting list and identify gaps	“shared service” provision? If so, which providers/potential providers? Do Members wish to consider applicants from outside of the Borough for plots on council sites and vice versa?
		Future provision and providers	Identify areas of search and potential sites/providers	Do Members wish to consider the principle of investing in additional provision?
2.	Management	Administration	Rationalise administration into single team	Do Members wish to adopt a more robust approach to allotment management, including eviction where rules are breached?
		Waiting Lists	Manage waiting list more robustly	
		Plot sizes	Offer differing plot sizes	Do Members wish to offer varying plot sizes and tenancies to encourage greater participation?
		Tenancy agreements	Review and update agreements	
		Enforcement	Enforce tenancy agreements more robustly and speedily	Do Members wish to consider differing management models, from completely devolved community management to stewardship if and where appetite and capacity exists?
		Community management	Investigate appetite and capacity for community management	
		Stewardship	Investigate appetite and capacity for stewardship scheme	
3.	Resources	Cost to the Council	Provide detailed cost analysis	Do Members wish to implement a charging structure which seeks to
		Charging policy (subsidy v cost	Agree principle of	

		recovery) Collection of rent Capacity Funding	either subsidising the service or seeking to achieve cost recovery Pursue non payment more robustly Accept constraints of current capacity or invest to increase Accept constraints of current capital and revenue availability or seek to increase/invest	recover a greater proportion of the costs of providing the service? Do Members wish to review concessionary rents? Do Members wish to consider charging per m2 rather than flat rate per plot? Do Members wish to pursue non payment and enforce eviction in appropriate cases? Do Members wish to invest in the service?
4.	Sustainability	Waste management Water Toilets Biodiversity	Develop waste management rules for all sites Develop water use rules for all sites Set criteria for toilet provision Integrate biodiversity considerations into the proposed policy	Do Members wish to require plot holders to manage and dispose of their own waste? Do Members wish to restrict the use of mains water and consider troughs instead of stand pipes? Do Members wish to consider providing toilets on any sites? Do Members wish to promote and protect biodiversity on all sites?
5.	Marketing	Benefits Health and Well-being	Agree marketing approach Promote benefits of allotment	Do Members wish to actively market allotment gardening?

		Barriers	gardening in emerging Health and Well-being strategy Investigate measures to overcome barriers to use	Do Members wish to link allotment gardening into the emerging Health and Well-being strategy? Do Members wish to invest in the service to overcome barriers?
		Consultation	Consult on proposed direction of policy	Who do Members wish to consult with and what is the scope of the consultation?
		Partnership	Investigate appetite and capacity of partners to contribute	Do Members wish to focus on any particular partners to assist in delivering the service?

- 3.2 If Cabinet agree, your officers will present the options to the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee to inform and facilitate the discussion and provide ongoing support to the committee to carry out its agreed methodology for completing the scrutiny and consultation process.

It is recommended that Cabinet request the Active and Cohesive Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee to undertake a review of the issues identified with particular reference to local management, meeting future demand and reducing the current cost.

4. **Proposal**

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

5. **Reasons for Preferred Solution**

- 5.1 To update the Allotments Policy and seek to achieve efficiency savings in relation to the cost of providing an allotment service.

6. **Outcomes Linked to Sustainable Community Strategy and Corporate Priorities**

- 6.1 Creating a cleaner, safer and sustainable Borough.

6.2 Creating a healthy and active community.

7. **Legal and Statutory Implications**

7.1 There are a number of legal and statutory implications relating to the provision, maintenance and charging of allotments. These were detailed in the previous report and will be reviewed and included within the subsequent report to Cabinet.

8. **Equality Impact Assessment**

8.1 An assessment will be undertaken as part of the review process.

9. **Financial and Resource Implications**

9.1 Financial implications will be considered as part of the review process. The total net cost to the Council of the allotment service in 2011/12 was £43,559.

9.2 The review will be led by officers from the Community Business Unit in the Operations Service, and this will be programmed into the team's work plans and absorbed within existing staff resources.

Support will be required from officers in other Business Units including Legal, Finance, Property, ICT and Business Improvement.

10. **Major Risks**

10.1 The risks associated with each option will be considered as part of the review process.

11. **Key Decision Information**

11.1 This initiative impacts on more than 2 wards and has been included in the Forward Plan.

12. **Earlier Cabinet Resolution**

12.1 Cabinet – 30 November 2011: Res No. 28.

13. **List of Appendices**

None

14. **Background Papers**

None