

TITLE OF REPORT: Update on Council Allotments Programme

Purpose of the Report

1. To report on the work of the Council's Allotment Officer as requested at previous OSC.

Background

2. The Council employed an Allotments Officer in November 2020. Since that time the Officer, Colette Davies, has been working to deal with a number of issues, including waiting lists, unlettable and overgrown plots, and invoicing among others. Progress on this is set out below.

Waiting lists

3. Waiting list applicants on the pre 2019 list have been contacted to see whether applications are still current, and to see if they wanted to remain or be removed as personal situations can change. This work is ongoing.
4. In Dec 2020 there were 1123 waiting list applications. Today this number is 925, including 399 new applications received since Dec 2020.
5. Between Dec 2020 and Feb 2022, 182 waiting list applicants have been allocated their own plot
6. Where possible larger plots are being split into more manageable sizes, reducing waiting list and this also brings in extra revenue
7. A new allotment system is being set up that will clearly identify when plot offers have expired, speeding up process of making a plot offer.
8. Calling up waiting list applicants to see if they still want a plot before offering it out to them, this speeds up the plot offer process.

Ongoing

9. Historical unlettable plots are being identified with a view to bringing them back into lettable condition.
10. Overgrown plots are being offered out with a rent-free period as incentive to accept.
11. Regular monitoring outstanding invoices, and 'notice to quit' letters have been issued where necessary, allowing waiting list applicants to be allocated newly vacant plots.

12. Regular site visits are taking place to ensure current tenants are complying with their tenancy agreement. Where this is not the case, the enforcement process will start, providing tenants adequate time to improve the plot (informal warning 28 days (revisit plot), formal warning 28-day (revisit plot), final formal 28 days (revisit plot) request Notice to quit from our legal team, if they don't comply they will be evicted.
13. Historically, site secretaries on Association managed sites have been responsible for allocating plots and there have been cases where people on the waiting list have been bypassed. The Allotments Officer now takes a more proactive role with the site management and allocations to prevent queue jumping. Regular updates are requested and if a plot is not allocated in accordance with the Council waiting list, this is questioned.
14. Allotments with horses – we currently have 2 sites, Leam Lane Stock and the Hurrocks. Historically both sites have been used for horses, all be it illegally for number of years.
 - **Hurrocks** - The allotment officer has already met with all tenants from the Hurrocks for an inspection, there are two plots with horses, they do not have a tenancy agreement and do not pay rent. This site is currently at risk as it may be needed for a flood bank due to the new development. When the allotment officer met with the tenants, she identified the central plots generally where fully cultivated, and it was just the perimeter allotments that were not getting used correctly, currently the plots are not getting relet as they may be reclaimed. The Derwent West Bank Flood Mitigation Study group were supposed to be having a meeting in January 2022 to decide what part of the site will be needed, but it was postponed, The Allotment officer has emailed her contact to see if it has been rescheduled. No further action has been taken until we find out what is happening with the site, one suggestion is to leave the central cultivated allotments and reclaim the perimeter plots this will also eliminate the plots currently being used to stable horses.
 - **Leam Lane Stock allotments** (previously known as Whyndyke Stock Site)- The allotment officer intends to meet with each tenant for full access to the allotments. A full survey of the site will be done, to correctly identify which part of the site they occupy and what animals they have. Currently there is no up to date site plan and very limited historic information. The allotment officer is proposing to start these inspections Sept / Oct 2022, when the busy time in the allotment season is ending.
 - The Legal team have also been contacted for advice, to confirm if the tenants with horses have any legal right, due to the length of time that they have been allowed to keep their horses on site. We have been advised by previous services who managed the allotments that the horses have been on site 10+ years.

Proposals

15. Proposed changes to the billing period will be brought forward. This would change the allotment billing to 1st Oct to 30th September. The rationale for this is that generally people tend to decide to terminate just after annual billing, which is currently 1st April to 31st March, with invoices dated 8th April.

16. By the time they tell us, it's generally well into May / June after debt recovery. Currently with April billing we are well into the cultivation / prep season, so the new tenants technically miss on quite a bit of prep time, also the plots have started to get very overgrown as the plots have been left. By changing the billing date, the plot would then be vacant and ready for the new year for new tenants with minimal weeds as its wintertime, reducing the councils cost for works to bring the plots back up to lettable standard.
17. Intention to meet with our park and open space team, to identify areas what we can temporarily use for community gardens, to make areas easily accessible to local residents i.e., corner of park, sports fields etc.
18. Potential to contact local GPs, etc to see if they have any patients that would like to become involved in these community gardens, they could meet likeminded people and working on a community allotment is good for the wellbeing as well as help keeping you physically healthy.
19. The Allotments Officer will meet tenants on problem sites and explain what is expected moving forward, including proof of occupancy and photo ID as there is evidence of sub-letting going on.
20. Meetings have taken place with some tenants and local Councillors, as historically people have been using the allotments as garden extensions. Agreement has been sought with tenants (with the approval of local councillors) that we will allow the tenants to gradually improve on cultivation each year to bring the plots back in to the correct use.
21. Currently in the process of trying to purchase new allotment software which will assist in the management of the allotments across the borough, which will also allow members of the public to go online and apply for allotment, see how many are on the waiting list, what their position is, make a complaint, etc.
22. Contact has also been made with the Web team about getting an interactive allotment map on the webpage, where a member of the public could enter a post code and view allotment sites, including information on number of plots, annual charge and site management.

Recommendations

23. The Housing, Environment and Healthier Communities OSC is asked to note progress and proposed next steps for the Allotments Programme.

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