

TITLE OF REPORT: Update on the Council's Allotment Service

Purpose of the Report

1. To report on the work of the Council's Allotments Officer and allotments service.

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. The service transferred from Public Health to Environment & Fleet Management in October 2022. An update was provided to OSC in March 2022 and the following updates on progress since that date.

Waiting lists

3. We currently have 594 waiting list applications and this figure includes 215 new applications that have been processed since 1 Oct 2022.
4. Between October 2022 and October 2023 120 waiting list applicants have been allocated their own plot.
5. Where possible larger plots are being split into more manageable sizes, reducing waiting list and this also brings in extra revenue, this is to be continued as part of routine site management.
6. Regular contact with waiting list applicants is proven to be beneficial to manage long waiting lists. We currently have no lettable vacant plots suitable for cultivation.

Updated Tenancy Agreement

7. The council currently has 1333 allotments across 56 sites. Each allotment holder tends their allotment under a Tenancy Agreement. In general, most allotment holders manage their plot in line with the council's expectations and the Tenancy Agreement. However, on occasion, issues can arise where tenants have misunderstood or misinterpreted the Agreement and gaps in the existing Agreement have been exposed. This is usually by new allotment holders who do not have the experience or full understanding of how allotment plots should be managed. Also, the Tenancy Agreement has not been reviewed for some time and it was felt necessary to update the Agreement to help support the Allotments Officer in their application of the rules and also make it easier to understand, particularly for new tenants.
8. The updated agreement will be issued to new allotment holders only, to ensure a gradual improvement in plots in going forward but the improvements will also be

encouraged amongst existing holders. The changes have been given the full support by the Allotment Association.

9. The key changes and reasons for the updates are detailed below.

Vehicles and Tyres

10. Historically tenants have used tyres to grow vegetables in but it has been found that tyres degrade and leach chemicals into the soil. Also, it is very costly for the council to remove and dispose of tyres from vacant plots. Some tenants store trailers or old cars on their plots which is inappropriate and can cause pollution problems. Caravans have historically been used on allotments but we want to prevent this in going forward. They can also be very expensive to remove from vacant plots.
11. The updated Agreement includes clauses to prevent the use of tyres, vehicles and caravans on allotment plots.

Beekeeping

12. Beekeeping is becoming more popular and we wish to encourage this where it is appropriate to do so. Beehives can pose a risk to allotment holders where they are not properly managed.
13. The updated Agreement includes a clause to request permission prior to introducing beehives and other arrangements will be required to ensure that proper arrangements are in place to minimise risk and nuisance.

Bonfires/burning rubbish

14. The majority of our sites are located very close to residential properties. Residents should be able to open their windows, hang out washing, sit in their garden without smoke nuisance from the allotments. The majority of allotment complaints relate to smoke nuisance. Association managed sites already have burning restrictions (Nov to March) but at the moment our tenants can burn all year. There is no need to burn all year and tenants should be encouraged to compost garden waste. There is concern that some tenants bring waste to the sites to burn.
15. The updated Agreement includes clauses to control and restrict burning.

Vermin

16. Vermin problems are on the increase and it needs to be made clear to tenants that they are responsible for their own pest control and to manage their allotment to prevent attracting and harbouring vermin. The updated Agreement includes a clause on this requirement.

Cultivation

17. An updated clause clarifies the percentage of the allotment that needs to be cultivated.

Structure/buildings

18. Historically tenants have built brick buildings and oversized structures such as conservatories on allotments. The updated Agreement clarifies what structures and items are allowed on site.

Site Perimeter

19. The council is responsible for the perimeter of allotment sites but it is not always affordable to replace or repair perimeter structures in line with the expectation of allotment holders. The current clause on the issue will be updated with 'determined by the available budget' to help manage tenants' expectations.

Ongoing Issues being addressed

20. Historical unlettable plots are being identified with a view to bringing them back into a lettable condition subject to appropriate funding.
21. Overgrown plots will be offered out with a rent-free period as an incentive to accept the plot.
22. Regular monitoring of outstanding invoices and 'notice to quit' letters have been issued where necessary, allowing waiting list applicants to be allocated newly vacated plots.
23. Regular site visits are taking place to ensure current tenants are complying with their tenancy agreement.
24. 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's waiting list, this is challenged.
25. We currently have 2 sites with horses; Leam Lane Stock and the Hurrocks. Historically both sites have been used for horses albeit unauthorised use for number of years.
 - Hurrocks - topographical and bathymetric surveys at Derwent West Bank have now been completed and the Consultant is moving on to the next stage of the feasibility report. We are awaiting a further update.
 - Leam Lane Stock allotments – a full survey was carried out Oct/Nov 2022. The site is not classed as an allotment site and discussion will take place with Property Services and Ward Members on its future management, Property Services currently rent out the surrounding grazing land. Details of a survey have been provided to Ward Members including information on what the individual plots are being used for.
26. Community Gardens – Constant monitoring of the waiting list and communication with individuals has resulted in increased participation. We have 2 new community groups this year at Bill Quay and Heartlands, Chopwell. They have been given free rent. Community group gardening has had a positive impact on the waiting lists. We will continue to encourage community groups with an interest in allotments.

Community allotments will also provide some capacity and opportunity for GP social-prescribing and we will work with Public Health on this longer term objective.

27. We have found that it has not been necessary to purchase new software to manage the allotments as we have a working spreadsheet system that has proven to be more than adequate to successfully manage the allotments. The interactive map on the council website is now up and running for members of the public to use.
28. Bill Quay Allotments is now managed by the council as unfortunately the previous Association folded.

Recommendations

29. The Housing, Environment and Healthier Communities OSC is asked to note progress and ongoing improvement of the allotments service.

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