

Cheltenham Borough Council
Overview and Scrutiny committee – 3 March 2014
Progress report on recommendations from
Allotments Scrutiny Task Group

Accountable member	Cabinet Member Sustainability, Councillor Roger Whyborn
Accountable officer	Grahame Lewis – Executive Director
Ward(s) affected	All
Key Decision	No
Executive summary	<p>A review of allotments was initiated by the Overview and Scrutiny (O & S) Committee in July 2012 and a task group set up with defined terms of reference.</p> <p>Following a number of meetings and site visits, the report and recommendations of the scrutiny task group were considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 10 January 2013.</p> <p>The report was considered by Council on 22 February 2013, at which time it was resolved that £600,000 of the Midwinter receipt would be set aside to fund the provision of additional allotments in Cheltenham.</p> <p>The report was considered by Cabinet on 12 March 2013, at which time it was resolved that the recommendations of the Allotments Scrutiny Task Group would be approved, subject to feasibility and resources, that the Council would enter into new tenancy agreements with allotment holders and it was noted that the O & S committee would undertake a review of the recommendations in 12 months.</p>
Recommendations	To consider progress against the recommendations and identify any issues where the committee has concerns that recommendations are not being progressed as planned.

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1. Background

- 1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee set out to clarify the legal position for allotment provision, both in terms of reviewing the processes for identifying the need for allotments and how this is allocated between parish and non-parish areas. The need for additional provision against available capital receipts was reviewed, as was the Allotments Strategy and the proposals for allotments on Weavers Field. These were detailed within the O & S report.
- 1.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee put forward 11 recommendations in their report. It was resolved that the Committee would review the implementation of the recommendations after 12 months. Set out below are the recommendations and the progress to date.

2. Strategic context

The provision of allotments helps to support the Council's aims that people are able to lead healthy lifestyles and that Cheltenham's natural and built environment is enhanced and protected. There is a statutory requirement to provide allotments.

3. Progress against the recommendations

3.1 The strength of local opposition to a proposal for a new allotment site should be a key consideration should such a situation arise again

The importance of local support for any new allotment site has been incorporated into the Council's approach to new provision. This was demonstrated in the consultation for proposed new allotments at Priors Farm. Several hundred local households were leafleted with details of a tentative proposal (a copy of the leaflet is available in the appendices) and feedback was sought via a pre-paid postcard. It was agreed that a positive response was required in order to take the proposals forward.

Request Cabinet to pursue the development into allotments of a small part of the farmland owned by the Borough Council at Priors Farm to the north of the borough, not affecting any public rights of way.

3.4 *The Green Space Development team, working with the Property and Asset Management department, undertook mapping and feasibility studies, including consultation with local residents and people on Council waiting lists for allotments. In total, over 80 people expressed initial interest in having an allotment in that location and most of the neighbouring residents responded positively to the proposal.*

3.5 *Initial interest does not always translate into plot tenancy and turnover amongst new plot-holders can be high (20% or more). The Council would want to be confident of sustainable future demand in the area in moving forward. The final phase of development on the (adjacent) former GCHQ site should provide for additional demand. Current sustainable size of site is estimated to be about 40 plots.*

3.6 That the Cabinet Member Sustainability maintains dialogue with the Parish Councils in terms of their responsibilities for addressing allotment waiting lists.

3.7 *The Cabinet Member Sustainability has had face to face and/or written communication with all the C5 Parish Councils in 2013, discussing the results of the legal enquiries into the issues surrounding allotment provision in parishes. Allotment related issues continue to be addressed by the Leader via the C5 meetings and also via a new meeting set up by the allotment officer in conjunction with the Parish Councils currently providing allotments (Prestbury, Charlton Kings, Swindon Parish).*

The initial meeting took place in November 2013, with the next scheduled for March 2014.

Further discussions are required to finalise the procedures for applicants from parish areas where there is no current allotment provision (Up Hatherley and Leckhampton with Warden Hill).

3.9 A review of enforcement of uncultivated allotment plots should be undertaken to alleviate the pressure on the waiting list, and that the current tenancy agreement should be revised to enable this and the points raised above to be enforced.

The enforcement procedures were reviewed and the main issue identified was that of serial offenders who neglected their allotments but responded to letters of enforcement with a flurry of activity such that they passed the subsequent inspection, only to neglect the plot again afterwards. This could happen many times. A three strikes and out policy was adopted, allowing for an automatic Notice to Quit on the third breach.

Volunteer site wardens detailed specific problems they were dealing with on their sites that they wished to see addressed in the new tenancy agreement. Draft copies were circulated to site wardens, local allotment association and all allotment holders for whom the allotment department holds an e-mail address. The new agreement provides more detail on cultivation requirements, permitted activities, amended bonfire rules and more. It also addresses specific problematic behaviours experienced at some sites.

Notice was served on all allotment holders in January 2013 and new tenancy agreements issued in January 2014 to all council allotment tenants. With 800 individualised agreements to issue, in duplicate, signed and witnessed by both parties, the Green Space Development team was pleased to report that over 90% of documents had been returned by end January 2014 and the team continues to chase the remaining documents to ensure that all allotment holders have a valid, current agreement with the council.

3.13 The Allotments Officer should endeavour to visit allotment sites more regularly in order to become known to allotment holders and ensure a good rapport is developed to encourage the best working relationship for the improvement of allotment sites.

3.14 *It is anticipated that site visits will become more regular in the spring and summer, which will coincide with allotment holders more likely to be on site. Working relationships between allotment officer and volunteer site wardens are good. With weekly or sometimes daily contact with some wardens, issues are quickly identified and resolved. The allotment officer would like to propose that the site wardens are included in any future review of allotments, as they are integral to the management of the sites and are well placed to comment on the relationship between the council and its tenants and the effectiveness of council policies.*

3.15 Additional support for allotments should be considered in the Green Space Development Team

As the Cabinet Member Sustainability responded at the Council meeting of 22 February 2013, when the recommendations were discussed, limited resources are available to provide additional support for allotments and the Council would look to achieve its aims with the assistance of the voluntary sector.

To this end, the allotment officer has been working with the volunteer site wardens to see what additional activities or responsibilities they might be willing or able to take on. Several have now taken on the waiting list for their site, contacting those on the waiting list to invite them to a plot viewing. Some are now organising plot viewing sessions where several people can view the site at the same time. Some have taken on plot measuring and splitting / combining tasks. All of these measures are designed to ensure that high standards can be maintained, given a 45% increase in tenant numbers over the last 6 years.

3.17 To review current lines of communication with allotment stakeholders and the Council's allotment service

As a result of the review, an allotment providers meeting has been established for Parish Councils and the borough council to meet, discuss issues, share approaches etc. The wardens indicated that they were happy with the frequency of the quarterly meetings. The Green Space Development Manager communicated to the local Allotment Association that they could request meetings when there were issues to discuss or matters that their members would like clarified. Meetings were duly organised in 2013 at the Depot, when requested, including with the Cabinet Member.

It is likely that the writing of the next allotment strategy will see the Council clarify its key stakeholders for allotments and ensure that a structure is in place for input into the new strategy and consultation thereafter.

To review the information about what commitment is required by taking on an allotment on the Council's website and include links to the Allotments Association website and investigate opportunities to introduce online notice and discussion boards.

The information on the website was reviewed and a link installed to the National Allotment Society website. Commitment required to work an allotment was discussed at the wardens meeting and the overwhelming response was that the television programmes made it look too easy and it didn't matter how much people were told otherwise, they believed what they saw on the television (that people can manage an allotment in half an hour a week), until it was proven otherwise through actual experience.

A new leaflet was written detailing the commitment required and giving advice on getting started. The existing tick-list was reviewed, with the wardens given the choice of which one they wanted to use when talking to prospective tenants. The old (ticklist) and new leaflet are included in the appendices.

The Green Space Development team concluded that there were insufficient internal resources to manage online notice and discussion boards but that the many online allotment Forums fulfilled the function of supplying information and discussion opportunities for new and existing plot holders.

3.24 That consideration be given to an allotment provision and enhancement policy in the emerging Cheltenham Local Plan and that in the meantime, planning officers should include the provision of allotments as a subject for discussion with developers at the pre-application stage.

The provision of allotments is now being discussed with developers at the planning stage, with the proposed development in South Cheltenham being a prime example. Previous discussions with developers of a care home facility in Windsor Street have resulted in the creation of 12 small allotment plots in the grounds of the care home, for the use of local residents. These are now up and running.

3.26 To request Cabinet to investigate opportunities to work in partnership with organisations such as Cheltenham Borough Homes, GAVCA and CCP to facilitate a scheme to distribute surplus produce to those most in need in the town.

Allotment site wardens have been approached for their suggestions on how such a scheme could work. They have advised that there are usually only a very few months when allotment holders have surplus produce but a box could be located at the gate for donations to be collected. They felt that it would be difficult to ensure any kind of regularity of supply and that most allotment holders distribute their surplus among friends, family and neighbours.

Additional information

Allotment demand has fallen somewhat in the last few years, both locally and nationally. However, there are still over 300 people on a waiting list for a Cheltenham Borough Council allotment, mostly in the south of the Borough. The allotment strategy will be reviewed in 2014, prior to a new strategy being written in 2015.

Report author	Contact officer: Fiona Warin, green space and allotment officer, fiona.warin@cheltenham.gov.uk 01242 774672
Appendices	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Consultation leaflet for Priors Farm2. Tick-list for prospective allotment holders3. Leaflet for prospective and new allotment holders
Background papers	Report and minutes of O&S committee 10 January 2013 Report to Council on 22 February 2013 Report and minutes of Cabinet meeting on 12 March 2013

