

# ***Information/Discussion Paper***

## **Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**03 November 2014**

### **Progress update on recommendations from Allotments Scrutiny Task Group**

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.

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.

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.

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.

A review of the recommendations was carried out in March 2014 and a further review was undertaken in October 2014.

## **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 are 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.
- 1.3 A further review was undertaken in October 2014. Set out below are the recommendations and the progress to date.

## **2. Strategic context**

- 2.1 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 (this arose in relation to Weaver's Field).
- 3.2 *As reported in March 2014, 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 and feedback was sought via a pre-paid postcard. It was agreed that a positive response would be required in order to take the proposals forward.*

**3.3** 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** *As reported in March 2014, 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** *Further feasibility studies were then carried out in relation to the proposed allotment site being part of considerations for a wider area.*

**3.6** *The Council would want to be confident of sustainable future demand for allotments in the area prior to moving forward. However, waiting lists are falling rapidly in most areas of the Borough. With a possible appeal in relation to a planning application for the Leckhampton area (which incorporates additional allotment provision), it is being proposed that additional allotment provision in the Priors area be put on hold for the time being.*

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

**3.8** *As reported in March 2014, the previous Cabinet Member Sustainability 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.*

**3.9** *Allotment related issues continue to be addressed by the Leader via the C5 meetings and the issues around allotment provision are being resolved. The Parish Councils without allotments are being asked to maintain waiting lists of people interested in allotments so that they can evidence demand for plots in relation to any future developments in their areas. The Borough will continue to accept applications from those parish areas on the understanding that priority may be given to non-parish residents.*

**3.10** *With declining waiting lists, the pressure on both the parishes and the Borough to explore additional allotment provision is diminishing and it has been agreed that the parishes will be able to input into the next allotment strategy, due to be written in 2015, so that there can be a joined-up approach to allotment provision in the Borough overall.*

**3.11** 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.

**3.12** *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.*

**3.13** *New tenancy agreements were issued to all allotment holders in January 2014.*

**3.14** *It is recognised that allotment holders usually have good intentions to work their allotments but unrealistic expectations or insufficient capacity to manage an allotment can sometimes be a factor in under-cultivation of plots, as can family illness and circumstance.*

**3.15** *A survey of allotment holders will be carried out prior to the writing of the 2015 Allotment Strategy and this will incorporate an opportunity for allotment holders to feedback on the extent to which*

*uncultivated allotments are a significant issue at any given site.*

**3.16** *With waiting lists declining, the pressure on the waiting list has been reduced.*

**3.17** *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.*

**3.18** *One of the Community Rangers, Janice Payne, is now undertaking weekly visits to allotment sites, having been allocated a half day for allotment related matters. This is in relation to plot inspections and site maintenance matters. The Allotment Officer has found that the demands of allotment administration, especially in light of the additional number of allotment tenancies now managed by the Council, has meant that there has not been much time available to undertake site visits. Also, during working hours, there are limited numbers of allotment holders on site (usually the same ones).*

**3.19** *Officers felt that with weekly or sometimes daily contact with some site wardens, issues were quickly identified and resolved and that there is a good rapport between allotment holders and the Council via the wardens and through direct contact. This will be raised in the allotment survey so that the Council can gauge the extent to which allotment holders are happy (or not) with the relationship they have with the Council.*

**3.20** *As proposed in March, 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.*

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

**3.22** *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.*

**3.23** *In March 2014, the allotment officer reported that the volunteer site wardens had agreed to take on some additional responsibilities and some were contacting applicants off the waiting list to arrange plot viewings, some were organising group viewing sessions where several people could view the available plots at the same time and some have taken on plot measuring and splitting / combining tasks. All of these measures were designed to ensure that high standards could be maintained, given a 45% increase in tenant numbers over the last 6 years.*

**3.24** *The survey of allotment holders should give some indication about whether the Council's allotment tenants are satisfied with the way in which the allotment sites and administration are managed.*

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

**3.26** *As a result of the review, an allotment providers meeting has been established for parish councils and borough council to meet, discuss issues, share approaches etc. The wardens expressed 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 have been duly organised at the Depot, when the allotment association has requested.*

**3.27** *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.*

**3.28** *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.

**3.29** *As reported in March 2014, 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.*

**3.30** *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. Both were included in the appendices of the March 2014 review.*

**3.31** *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.*

**3.32** 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.

**3.33** *As reported in March 2014, 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. In Oakley, a planning application for the final stage of the former GCHQ site development incorporated additional parking for allotment holders in the event that future development of a site at Priors takes place. 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.*

**3.34** 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.

**3.35** *As reported in March, 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.*

## **4. Additional information**

**4.1** In March 2014, it was reported that allotment demand had fallen in the last few years, both locally and nationally and that there were 300 people on a waiting list for a Cheltenham Borough Council allotment, mostly in the south of the Borough.

**4.2** The waiting list has fallen further and there are now less than 200 people waiting for an allotment, ranging from two people at the Severn Road site, 9 people at the Terry Ashdown site to 40 for the Asquith Road site. This represents perhaps a one year wait, in comparison with a four year wait when lists were at their longest.

**4.3** A survey of allotment holders will be carried out prior to a new allotment strategy being written in 2015. This should help the Council to identify areas of focus for the next allotment strategy and assess the allotment service, as experienced by the allotment tenants.

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