



Overview and Scrutiny: Scrutiny Review Panel – Allotments 7 MAY 2014

Background

The review panel was commissioned by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider ‘what can the Council do to encourage and maximise the amount of food grown in our city’s allotments by reducing the number of unused and unproductive plots’ with a focus on:

- (1) What is the Council’s strategy for managing unused allotments and tackling the waiting list for allotments? What is the policy on unviable allotments and can these be replaced? How can the Council influence private allotment associations etc to ensure that allotments are fully let and used?
- (2) Given the economic climate how can the Council encourage maximum food growing production on existing allotments, private and Council let?
- (3) Given the waiting list and timescale for being offered an allotment can the Council improve/change its lettings and management policy to reduce the timescale involved to let/relet allotments?

The members of the panel present at the meeting were:

- Councillor Mohammed Ibrahim (Chair)
- Councillor Glyn Jenkins
- Councillor Anne Peach
- Councillor Roger Steel

Evidence gathering

The review panel based its findings and recommendations on desk-top research, background information and a presentation made at the meeting held on 7 May 2014, by the following contributors:

Councillor Dave Trimble – Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Culture

Eddie Curry	- Head of Parks and Open Spaces) Nottingham City
Alex Begg	- Allotment and Community Garden Officer) Council

The panel is grateful to these individuals and the members of the public who attended the meeting for their contribution to the review.

Key findings

1. LOCAL CONTEXT

1.1 The Allotments and Small Holdings Acts between 1908-1950 comprise the two main parts of the principle legislation which governs allotments:

- the 1908 Act - if the council of any borough, urban district or parish are of opinion that there is a demand for allotments in the area it shall provide a sufficient number of allotments and lease these to its residents. Also, if a Council receives written representation by any six registered parliamentary electors or persons who are liable to pay an amount in respect of council tax resident in the area must take into consideration this request for the provision of allotments.
- the 1925 Act - where a local authority has purchased or appropriated land for use as allotments the local authority shall not sell, appropriate, use or dispose of the land for any purpose other than use for allotments without the consent of the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

1.2 Definition and use of Allotment Gardens from 1922 Act – ‘the expression “allotment garden” means an allotment not exceeding forty poles (just over 1000 sq m) in extent which is wholly or mainly cultivated by the occupier for the production of vegetable or fruit crops for consumption by himself or his family’.

1.3 There are nearly 3500 parcels of land in Nottingham City that have been variously described as allotments. Of these, 2616 are City Council owned. There are currently 42 viable allotment sites in Nottingham City comprising approximately 3450 plots. These sites are reasonably widely spread across the City but there is a lack of provision in Rise Park, Bestwood and Lenton areas.

Type of Plot	Number of Plots	Comment
NCC plots -viable sites in City	2616	Plots under 125sq m added together and divided by 125.
NCC plots -viable sites outside City	181	Blenheim New Site (40) Wilford Lane (136) Tollerton (5)
NCC Plots - Non Viable	251	Historical use Non or poor access Most on retained Housing portfolio land
Plots - Private sites	In excess of 400	Approx 170 in use 3 Sites New Aspley, Radford Bridge, Bagthorpe
Total Number of Plots	Approx 3450	Inc all above

1.4 There are currently 106 plots classed as derelict on viable sites. Despite the Allotments service putting funds into restoring some of these and re-letting them by the Allotment Service, the number of derelict plots has increased due to discovery of dangerous buildings or a number of plots being returned in poor condition following the death of an elderly tenant.

1.5 The majority of these are made up of very small plots, often long vacant, and are typically located within housing estates where only neighbouring houses have access. These small parcels of land are not suitable as allotment gardens and at the present time the Allotments Service budget does not have adequate resources to manage these parcels of land or the antisocial behaviour that is associated with some of them. Area by area consultations are taking place regarding the future of

these parcels of land and any decisions about them will be made by the Portfolio Holder.

- 1.6 Residents are now able to apply directly for an allotment on the Council's website¹. The average waiting time for an allotment in 2013 was 21 months compared to 25 months in 2012. Residents living in Bulwell Forest and Bestwood Wards have the poorest access to Allotment Gardens while sites in the Sneinton area have the longest waiting lists at the moment.

2. FOOD INITIATIVE GROWING AND THE FOOD GROWING FRAMEWORK²

- 2.1 A priority for the Food Growing Framework³ is to continue to provide and improve on Nottingham's long-standing allotment tradition. Working within the context of allotment law, and supported by strong community management, the framework will work to maximise the use of plots and improve their quality, accessibility and condition. This will be supported by a high quality allotment service and enhanced by the celebration and promotion of allotment gardening.
- 2.2 The Food Initiatives Group⁴ (FIG) was set up in 2001 with an original aim to ensure people on low income had access to affordable food. Managed by Groundwork Greater Nottingham since 2003, FIG's core work was shaped and driven with the NHS and focused on encouraging the uptake of healthy eating within communities across Nottinghamshire. A bid was submitted in 2011 to the Big Lottery Local Food fund and FIG Local was born; this project seeks to promote and support accessible and affordable local food, and recognises the need to re-localise the food system and support both food producers/providers and consumers in order to support local food fully.
- 2.3 This is delivered through a working model that champions local food and its producers, builds collaboration between local producers and consumers and supports community food projects to outreach into areas of particularly identified need. The FIG Local through the vehicle of the Notts Nosh brand <http://food.groundworknottingham.org.uk/> helps people to buy, grow, eat and enjoy local food.

3. EFFICIENT USE OF ALLOTMENTS

- 3.1 Historically, allotments were originally provided to allow the 'labouring poor' to have space to grow their own food. However, post 1950 and up until the rise of the idea of sustainability, allotments have been more often thought of as a leisure activity with people often growing vegetables for the show bench. Many of the allotment plots in Nottingham have been described as leisure gardens, which are typically large in size with hedges and individual gated entrances and used for a variety of purposes

¹ Nottingham City Council Allotments website page - <http://www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/article/21992/Allotments>

² The Food Growing Framework strategy link can be found on this page - <http://www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/article/21992/Allotments>

³ Excerpt from the Food Growing Framework page 3, Food Growing Themes

⁴ Information provided in the briefing paper presented to the panel

- 3.2 The Allotment Act 1922⁵ states that more than 50% (wholly or mainly) of an allotment garden needs to be given over to growing fruit and vegetables for the individual and their family. A surplus is allowed to be sold, but by its nature a surplus cannot be planned. The Council's tenancy agreement also states that a number of different crops need to be grown. Beyond this, the Council has no control over how efficient the use of the plot is.
- 3.3 70% of the allotment plots are leased to allotment associations and the leases do not cover how efficient the use should be, only that the plots are used as Allotment Gardens.

4. FINDINGS

- 4.1 The Council only has control of approximately 30% of allotment sites across the city (approximately 600 plots) and can only 'influence' allotment associations through incentives such as, providing financial support for capital improvements to sites with enhanced security and improving access to sites etc. The allotment associations have to abide by the lease agreements they have with the Council but can decide their own allocations policies etc. The Council can only encourage associations to implement its own allocation policy and model lease agreement it cannot force them to do so as they are self managed.
- 4.2 The waiting list for an allotment could be reduced by offering smaller or shared plots and the Council should encourage allotment associations to lease shared/smaller plots. It is acknowledged that individuals, families or small groups may not have the time to manage large plots effectively given family and time constraints and this may encourage a wider range of allotment holders, small groups or families the chance to grow their own food and engage with each other. So, individuals may be more interested in leasing smaller plots.
- 4.3 There appears to be very little support and guidance for individuals once they take on an allotments and suggestions made by members of the public that there is support available which needs funding needs to be explored. Area committees should be could also be a source of funding to develop community food production generally.
- 4.4 A lack of skill and knowledge on growing fruit and vegetables may be a deterrent to some citizens from taking on an allotment. However, there are a lot of individuals in the community with a wealth of experience who may be prepared to help support them for free.

5. CONCLUSION

- 5.1 The Panel felt that the lack of a uniform allocations policy for equal access to allotments across the city is unfair and that this was an area where the Council should continue to exert its influence to embed the new model lease and include new clauses for the allocations policy and management of sites when association leases come up for renewal. These are very long leases (between 30 to 50 years) and when an allotment lease is up for renewal the Council should include clauses which

⁵ The Allotments - Commons Library Standard Note, published 21 March 2012, can be found here: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/briefing-papers/SN00887/allotments>

ensure allocation policies are transparent and that its own model leases are used by the association.

- 5.2 Given the demand for allotments and waiting list the Panel felt that the Council should continue to promote the sharing/division of plots to leaseholders for Council owned sites but also those managed by Allotment Associations.
- 5.3 Efforts should be made to bring inexperienced and experienced allotment holders together to encourage training and support for people new to growing food in the community.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) Desired outcome – Council’s tenancy agreements clearly define the responsibilities of the allotment holder

The Council's direct let tenancy agreements should be more robust to encourage greater tenant responsibility but also to enable the Council to withdraw the lease if the allotment is not cared for properly in a timely manner.

(2) Desired outcome – Consistency and transparency in the allocation policies and procedures maintained by Allotment Associations

All Allotment Associations should be encouraged to adopt the Council’s allocation policy and new model leases throughout the City when leases are up for renewal but also in as an incentive for the Council providing infrastructure improvements to sites.

(3) Desired outcome – Well maintained and managed allotments as a result of support to new allotment holders to encourage and promote better practice and also to prevent people giving up their allotments as they do not have the skill/time or expertise to effectively prepare and cultivate the site

- (a) Options should be explored to ascertain what support/training is available for new and prospective tenants in cultivation and management of allotments;
- (b) Allotment associations should be encouraged to offer half size/smaller plots and shared plots for individuals or groups which may result in participation from a wider demographic and may be a less onerous time commitment for individuals.

(4) Desired outcome – Allotments remain viable, secure and welcoming places to be on and to visit

- (a) The Allotments Service should explore third party funding and whether can be obtained from area committees to improve allotment infrastructure and reduce anti-social behaviour at some allotment sites;
- (b) a review of options to tackle derelict sites should take place, including continuing the practice of offering overgrown plots free of charge for the first year and using community payback or school children etc to assist in the clearance of potentially viable sites.

(5) Desired outcome – Reduced waiting times for citizens requesting an allotment

City Council waiting lists should be reduced by encouraging those with more than one allotment to relinquish them and by encouraging either the splitting or sharing of plots. In addition, the Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Culture is asked to write to Allotment Associations to encourage them to persuade their tenants to consider splitting/sharing plots as well as being more open and transparent in how plots are allocated in order to reduce waiting lists.

Contact details

If you would like to find out more about this review and/ or overview and scrutiny in general please contact:

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If you require this information in an alternative language, **large font**, Braille, audio tape or text only version, please contact the Overview and Scrutiny Team (contact details above).