



Report to: Environment Committee, 25th May 2021

Report of: Corporate Director, Homes and Communities

Subject: REVIEW OF THE DELIVERY AND MANAGEMENT OF ALLOTMENTS

1. Recommendation

That the Committee:

- 1.1 Note the contents of this report and in particular the findings of the National Allotment Society's (NAS) Executive Summary "Review of Allotment Management in Worcester City", at Appendix;**
- 1.2 Note the Allotment Task and Finish Group's endorsement to progress further work in respect of Option 2 (The Council to appoint a dedicated Allotments Officer, with reduced roles for the Forum and the Site Representatives) and direct officers to undertake this further work, including further engagement with key stakeholders and interested parties; and**
- 1.3 Note that a further report for decision will be presented to this Committee in July 2021 detailing the outcomes of this further work.**

2. Background

- 2.1 Following a [REPORT](#) to Environment Committee, 27th October 2020 it was agreed that an independent organisation be commissioned to help the City Council review the purpose of and undertake a review of council allotments. The report was to include a review of how the management of council allotments currently works and recommendations for improvement.
- 2.2 In line with the above report, this area of work has been supported by a Task & Finish Group including Cllrs Stafford (Chair), Griffiths, Squires, Udall and Alcott. The group agreed that the piece of work undertaken should be a 'comprehensive review of the way allotments are managed is required, and should take into account:

Governance

1. The role of the Forum and its Executive Committee, including the election process and the Forum constitution;
2. The role of the Council and how this links with the Forum – i.e. which organisation is responsible for the various aspects of allotment management;
3. How day to day matters such as plot take up, non-cultivation of plots and more complex cases such as disputes are managed;
4. How the 3 self-managed allotment sites operate and how this compares with the other sites;

Data and Performance

1. A review of documentation and procedures relating to allotment management;
2. How publicity and information about allotments is provided to residents;
3. Consultation with customers, forum members ('site reps'), council officers and elected members about the service;
4. Costs and financial management;

Good Practice

1. Options for managing green waste on sites and good practice – including bonfires and biodiversity;
 2. Benchmarking and good practice on how allotments are managed in other areas
- 2.3 A subsequent procurement process was undertaken and in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of this Committee the National Allotment Society (NAS) were chosen to undertake the review.
- 2.4 The latest meeting of the Task & Finish Group was held on 20th April 2021 at which the NAS review report was presented and discussed. The group subsequently agreed that a report be developed for May 2021 Committee that shared the reviews findings and options, and that sought direction to progress with a preferred option as agreed by Task & Finish Group members
- 2.5 The Executive Summary of the NAS review report (March 2021) is attached at **Appendix 1** and to further support the item at Committee, representatives from NAS will be in attendance to present an overview of their findings.

3. Key Findings from National Allotments Society (NAS) Review

- 3.1 The current system of allotment management includes two Self-Managed sites where the allotment holders take responsibility for managing their specific sites. The remaining sites are managed by the Council and directly let to plot holders.
- 3.2 Direct Let sites generally have site representatives that interact with Officers. An intermediary group, the Forum, is in place; the Forum was designed to act as a conduit for discussion between the council and the Direct Let sites users/Site Representatives.
- 3.3 The NAS review found that the Council management of the sites was spread across several Officers; there was no one Officer directly responsible for day-to-day management.
- 3.4 Although this type of approach can have benefits in terms of resilience and avoiding single point of failure, based on the wider findings within the report and in order to clarify and improve lines of responsibility, it is considered beneficial for the council to have a dedicated resource so that site holders, site representatives and key stakeholders have a point of contact whose primary focus is the management of allotments.
- 3.5 The review found that the two Self-Managed sites demonstrated a strong community spirit, with several plot holders indicating that site management had improved during their tenancy. There is good communication from the Management Committee and on-site problems are being resolved quickly.

- 3.6 This was a very pleasing aspect of the report and does illustrate the benefits of what an effectively managed and administered self-managed site can deliver. Long term it is the aspiration of the council to encourage as many sites as possible to move towards self-management but only where sites are ready and able to do so.
- 3.7 There is variation in how each of the sites operate, their condition and the level of engagement between site representatives and the council. It is considered necessary therefore for improvements to be made in several key areas driven by a dedicated resource, that will enable us to move towards a position where we can support more sites to become self-managed.
- 3.8 Allotment holders on the Direct Let sites reported that the management of sites needed improvement. There was a belief that the Forum arrangements were not working as well as they could. Relationships between forum members and perceived lack of transparency around election of forum members were just two of the issues raised. Communication was reported as being poor, with no coherent management messages reaching the sites.
- 3.9 Although there has been a focus on forum arrangements, it is the view of officers that communication between council and site holders/representatives and vice versa is a shared challenge and an opportunity to work together on so that there is a flow of relevant information both ways in a more streamlined and modern manner.
- 3.10 Retaining a forum would seem a prudent and sensible approach resulting from the review, but it would seem that the role of the forum and its membership requires refreshing. The council hold forums in other areas of its work such as Bereavement Services and Gull Management and these provide a relevant flow of information from the council and also enables the council to consult on future proposals and ideas before they reach more formal stages of consideration.
- 3.11 It is envisaged that moving forward and subject to further engagement, that the forum arrangements would be driven by the dedicated allotment resource with a view to clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the forum and maximising its usefulness. Having a dedicated resource also has the potential to reduce the number of site/plot specific issues raised at the forum, instead these being picked up more regularly through the links made between site holders / representatives and the dedicated resource
- 3.12 The review suggested six possible management arrangements for consideration by the Council:
1. Retain the existing management but improve and formalise the relationship between the Council and the Forum, with a reduced role for the Forum;
 2. The Council to appoint a dedicated Allotments Officer, with reduced roles for the Forum and the Site Representatives;
 3. The Council to take the allotment service back in-house (with dedicated Senior Officer and dedicated Administrator); removal of both the Forum and site representative functions;
 4. All sites to become Self-Managed;

5. The Council to let the allotment service to an external contractor;
 6. The Council to appoint a Limited Company (run by volunteers) to manage the service.
- 3.13 As set out in para 3.1 – 3.8 of this report, it would seem overall beneficial to progress plans for Option 2, and putting in place a dedicated allotment officer resource in the medium term in order to tackle the range of challenges that have been identified in the NAS review report and which are faced by both the Environmental Operations Service and plot holders and site representatives.
- 3.14 Having this dedicated resource would enable the council to have both the capacity and the right skills in place to take full responsibility for improving the allotments service with one of the key aspects of the role being proactive engagement with plot holders and site representatives, rather than mostly reactive which is the current operating model.

4. Preferred Option

- 4.1 As outlined within the main body of the report the preferred option following consideration of the review document by officers and consultation with the Allotments Task & Finish Group, is to progress further work around the implementation of option 2 – 'The Council to appoint a dedicated Allotments Officer, with reduced roles for the Forum and Site Representatives.
- 4.2 This further work will include further engagement with plot holders, site representatives and the forum to look at how option 2 can be best implemented and the structures and arrangements that will need to be in place to support it.
- 4.3 These structures and arrangements will include things that have direct benefits to the Council as well as plot holders. Opportunities around environmental performance and biodiversity will be explored as well as more traditional things such as site licenses and fees & charges.
- 4.4 It is then intended to bring a report back to this Committee in July 2021 for decision that will set out options for implementing option 2.

5. Alternative Options Considered

- 5.1 The NAS review report set out 6 options for consideration, all of which have been considered by officers and the Task & Finish Group.
- 5.2 In respect of option 1, this was discounted as it is evident that there are a number of challenges with the existing arrangements and manner in which the service is delivered, and this option felt an 'as is' option.
- 5.3 In respect of option 3, this was discounted because it was felt that there is a positive role that both a forum and site representatives can and should make and therefore the council is committed to clarifying and improving this, rather than removal.
- 5.4 In respect of option 4, although a longer-term aspiration moving to all self-managed sites at present is deemed impractical due to the variation in factors such as site condition, levels of engagement and governance challenges.

5.5 In respect of options 5 and 6, these were both discounted at this current time as such arrangements could take some time to work through and came with their own set of risks. It was felt option 2 would enable the council to improve the basic building blocks for a good quality allotments service in the shorter period of time.

6. Implications

6.1 Financial and Budgetary Implications

The NAS review report highlights that some sites are in need of upgrades, refurbishment or safety improvements; developing a capital investment programme would form part of the Allotment Officer's role, working with Property Services and Finance.

The revenue implications of introducing a dedicated Allotments Officer will form part of the July 2021 report and further work will need to be carried out to identify whether a single role can be formulated within existing resources or whether the requirement is for a new post as an addition to the organisational headcount.

In managing the revenue implications that the NAS review report has highlighted, the July 2021 report will present a range of options around how a revised fees & charges structure could support the introduction of option 2.

6.2 Legal and Governance Implications

No Legal or Governance implications have been identified at this stage, however the next report will detail any proposed changes to the allotments Terms of Reference, roles and responsibilities etc.

6.3 Risk Implications

Improving the way in which allotments are managed will help minimise financial, legal and reputational risks to the Council. It will also ensure a greater chance of plot holders wanting to sustain active use of their plots.

6.4 Corporate/Policy Implications

It is important for the Council to consider the options for managing allotments and concludes as to the best model and method that meets its social, economic and environmental priorities.

Improved management of the provision of allotment services will contribute towards the City Plan; helping to sustain and improve City assets whilst also encouraging users to actively participate in outdoor activity contributing to a healthy and active City.

6.5 Equality Implications

The Council would expect all allotment sites to be managed in compliance with the Equality Act 2010 and to be working towards best practice accessibility standards. At this stage no equality implications have been identified but further work will be undertaken ahead of the May 2021 report to ensure no one group of protected characteristics is unduly impacted by any set of proposals put forward.

6.6 Human Resources Implications

There are no human resource implications associated with this report.

6.7 Health and Safety Implications

It is extremely important that allotments are well managed in terms of ensuring health and safety for allotment users and visitors. Regular inspections would be undertaken by the Allotments Officer, liaising with the site reps (who would retain a role in reporting issues).

6.8 Social, Environmental and Economic Implications

Allotments have a key role in providing green open spaces for exercise and activity. In addition to physical health benefits there is also a mental health benefit and a social benefit from the provision of allotments.

This has been particularly highlighted and important this year during the pandemic where allotment holders have valued the opportunity to be outdoors in open space and also be part of the community spirit that exists amongst allotment sites.

Allotments provide vital patches of green open space within our urban areas that must be well managed to support biodiversity and environmental benefit.

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Background Papers: Allotments Review Report, Environment Committee (October 2020)
<http://committee.worcester.gov.uk/documents/s49023/2020-10-27%20Allotment%20Review.pdf>



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

REPORT FOR WORCESTER CITY COUNCIL - ALLOTMENT REVIEW. 26TH MARCH 2021

1. PURPOSE

To conduct a comprehensive investigation of current allotment practices at Worcester City council. This covers governance, management structure, site practices, financial and environmental impacts. Using the information gathered, to present alternative options for improving allotment management and assisting in achieving the Council's objectives.

2. METHODOLOGY

The present management approach was interrogated by the following means:

- i) Every site was visited to gain an understanding of the issues each faces and how they are addressed.
- ii) All ploholders and site representatives had the opportunity to express their views, through an online survey or telephone interview where not connected to the internet.
- iii) Zoom meetings were held to ask specific questions to each of the following stakeholder groups:
 - Councillors T and F Task Group Environmental Committee
 - Council Officers
 - Forum Executive Members
 - Site Representatives from the Direct Let Sites
 - Management Committees of the Self-Managed Sites
- iv) Worcester City Council was benchmarked against six other Councils of a comparable size.
- v) Weekly feedback to the Council

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Self- Managed Sites - management

The Self-managed sites were investigated and both had a strong community spirit, with 71% of ploholders saying that site management had improved during their tenancy. Communication from the Management Committee appears good and problems on sites generally resolved quickly.

Both sites have been able to keep the rents to £55, lower than the rates charged by Worcester City Council and produce a surplus.

3.2 Direct Let Sites – management

An intermediary group, the Forum, was initially set up as a means to devolve aspects of allotment management and act as a conduit for discussion between the council and the Direct Let Sites. The view of both site representatives and Council Employees, is that this is not working, mainly because of the attitude of strong-willed members of the Forum. Communication is poor and a coherent management message is not reaching the sites.

Fortunately, sites representatives are respected on their own sites and have been able to maintain support from ploholders. Approximately 50% of tenants think that site management has improved to some extent in recent years.

The Forum Executive is aware of these problems and admit that this is the main reason why Council employees have not attended their meetings for some time. Neither the Forum Constitution, nor the Council's Tenancy agreement are fit for purpose and require re-writing.

4. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

4.1 Biodiversity

With 82% of Worcester ploholders being either well informed or aware of the need for biodiversity, there is a sound basis to move forward using good practices. Other organisations such as the Wildlife Trust and the Worcestershire Environmental Group, recognise the importance of allotments in creating wildlife corridors in City space. This presents an opportunity for WCC to take the lead in co-ordination links between these groups and allotment sites as a means to achieving one of the Council's goals.

4.2 Bonfires and composting

Bonfires are widely used across all sites for the disposal of woody material, weeds and flood debris. It is now commonly accepted that garden bonfires are unnecessary, affect wildlife and cause nuisance and pollution. Some ploholders feedback said that they had to leave their site for health reasons when fires were burning.

This issue could be addressed by education, about which materials can be composted or used as a mulch. Additionally, encouragement could be given to the formation of site groups to deal with composting of bulkier materials. A more co-ordinated response from WCC is needed to ensure the flood debris is collected and disposed of in the correct manner.

4.3 Water Use

Water is a significant cost for most Local Authorities and for one major City Council in 2009 its allotments accounted for over 10% of their total usage, it is evident that WCC also have a problem with usage of water. Many Local Authorities have responded to this by removing orthodox taps, barring the use of hosepipes and installing self-filling water troughs to improve conservation and reduce the risk of contaminating the water supply.

Rainfall harvesting can play a valuable part, but although 76% of Plotholders claim to do this, our site visits did not support the evidence claimed that this is widely practiced. One Worcester Self-Managed site has implemented a water surcharge for plots utilizing green house or polytunnels.

4.4 Increasing Access

The gender profile of Worcester plot-holders was predominantly men – 60/40% compared to a recent NAS survey which showed a 53/47% male to female ratio, with women dominating in some regions. 17% of the Worcester plot-holders gardened as a family with children.

One facility that does encourage access by a much wider cross section of the community (families, disabled residents and women) is the provision of toilets. This is mentioned 13 times in the direct let site feedback and twice in the devolved site feedback.

Lottery funding for a composting toilet would be an option for the self-managed sites, Awards for All has funded numerous allotment toilets over the last 10 years.

A search of the National Lottery website shows that £10million of Lottery money has gone into allotment projects over the last 16 years (746 projects) with nothing to Worcester City allotments

5. OPTIONS FOR WORCESTER CITY COUNCIL

After examining all the data collected, NAS offer Worcester City Council, six options to demonstrate the ways in which allotments within the City can be managed

5.1 Option 1 - Worcester City Council stay as they are with significant changes

Within this option Worcester City Council would have to take a more definite role, the problems in need of rectifying have been outlined in detail within the full report

5.2 Option 2 – Worcester City Council appoint a full time Allotment Officer

This would involve the appointment of a dedicated officer, with previous experience of allotment management. In this instance it would be good practice to have a consultative body from the plot-holders, so that they still have a voice.

5.3 Option 3 – Worcester City Council take back the allotments in house

Again, this option would be difficult to achieve without the appointment of a dedicated person, or a total restructure of how the authority delivers the service. Within this option, there would be a cessation of the Forum and removal of site representatives.

5.4 Option 4 - Worcester City Council adopt Self-Management

Associations become responsible for overall management, along with day-to-day functions. This would require a programme of education / assistance to give confidence to all Associations to take on this role, ensuring a smooth transfer. This option may require some capital investment prior to leases being signed.

5.5 Option 5 – Worcester City Council contract out the allotment to an Independent Contractor

With option five a competitive tendering process needs to be in place, this option may improve efficiency and help with budgetary controls.

5.6 Options 6 – Worcester City Council form a Limited Company to manage Allotments in the City

Worcester City Council offer a lease to a Limited Company formed from keen volunteers who are prepared to manage and oversee the allotment associations. This is a format that is working in other regions and is mentioned in the Benchmarking section of the full report.

This may also require substantial capital investment, prior to a group taking on obligations.

6. CONCLUSION

The systems currently in place, for managing direct let sites are not working, the options above need to be carefully considered if the Council is to move ahead with a structure it can rely on for the future.

Cost implications have been set out in the full report. There is scope to extend the measures in place to reduce the environmental impact and improve biodiversity.

Access to allotments has been greatly appreciated, during the pandemic period we have experienced over the last twelve months.