

Norwich City Council

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

BRIEFING PAPER for meeting to be held on 14 January 2010

Allotments Task & Finish Group Report

Contact Officer: Steve Goddard, Scrutiny Officer

Panel members: Cllrs Bearman (Chair), Cannell, Offord

Purpose: To review the effectiveness of the Allotments Service and make recommendations for its improvement.

Summary of recommendations:

1. An allotments strategy to be prepared.
2. The best use of existing allotments to be made. Plot sizes should be tailored to individual needs; opportunities for sharing eg. within community groups should be allowed; the use of existing allotments should be maximised by clearing all overgrown plots; allotment associations or site representatives should be established for each site as soon as possible and self-management should be encouraged; communication with allotment holders should be improved.
3. Adequate provision of allotments to be made. Measures to include encouraging existing initiatives such as the SLI's 'Grow Our Own' project; the use of other council owned land to be investigated and liaison with Community Engagement Officers encouraged; new temporary sites to be provided on brown field sites; residents to be encouraged to suggest suitable sites; a requirement for community growing provision in all large scale housing developments included in the Local Development Plan; 'edible landscaping' to be actively encouraged; voluntary initiatives such as GardenShare schemes and community gardens to be encouraged.
4. Growing-your-own in places other than on allotments eg. in gardens to be encouraged.
5. External resources available to local authorities to be investigated. Allotment administration to be streamlined.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The reasons why people take on allotments have changed somewhat since they were first established back in the 19th century to enable the poor, particularly the poverty stricken agricultural labourers, to grow food for themselves and their families. Many plot holders still grow food and vegetables to reduce their household bills but the increasing demand for allotments owes a lot to the popularity of organic produce, awareness of climate change issues and 'food miles', and the desirability of producing consumables as locally as possible.

As well as their obvious uses for food growing, allotments need to be recognised for their other benefits, environmental, health and social. These include the provision of open space and wildlife habitats, the reduction of waste through composting and absence of food packaging, physical exercise and mental 'well-being', educational opportunities and contributions to community life.

1.2 Local authorities are legally obliged to provide allotments for residents in their areas under Section 23 of the 1908 Small Holdings & Allotments Act. Other statutes relating to allotment law were passed in 1925 and 1950. Statutory sites (those which have been acquired by an authority for use as allotments) are protected by the legislation but temporary sites (those that have been acquired for other purposes but used as allotment sites in the meantime) are not. If six or more parliamentary electors or council tax payers ask for allotments then the authority should consider providing them.

1.3 At present Norwich City Council own and manage 1532 plots on 18 statutory allotment sites throughout the city. There are however significant gaps eg. in the south central area (Town Close ward) and in the west of the city, though land has now been allocated for allotments in the Bowthorpe development area.

2. Background

2.1 The panel was set up to look at the effectiveness of the Allotments Service following a motion approved by council on 26 February 2008 asking for a Scrutiny investigation into the resources available to the Green Spaces Team for the service. The motion was proposed as a result of complaints to councillors and perceived customer dissatisfaction with the Allotments Service. The T&F group has in fact broadened the investigation beyond 'resources' and into allotments provision in general.

2.2 Up until 2004 the allotments had been managed by a full-time Allotments Officer with some part-time assistance from other staff. However between 2004 and the restructuring of the Green Spaces Department in 2006, a number of temporary officers had covered the role which resulted in unresolved problems and customer dissatisfaction. The Allotment Officer role is now shared between 3 Parks & Open Spaces Officers (POSOs) operating on an area basis. As well as being responsible for the management of 18 allotment sites (1532 plots), they also look after 23 parks and 93 open spaces including sports management. At present each officer allocates approximately 1.5 officer days per week to the management of the allotments. This time does not include time spent on service development work. Allotment responsibilities include: visiting and inspecting allotment sites (looking at unworked plots, managing plot sizes/splitting plots, plot clearance, repairs & maintenance,

enforcing allotments agreement); dealing with enquiries/complaints; allotment promotion; liaising with allotment associations/charitable initiatives.

Most of the administration aspects are now (as from August 2009) managed by the General Administration Support Team (GAS). The Customer Contact Team (CCT) still handle initial enquiries received by phone or in person at the counter, but if these generate any administrative work the enquiry is passed on to the GAS team. The GAS team's responsibilities include: managing the waiting list and offering plots; recording all contacts on the Comino software system and using the system to pass management issues on to the POSOs; arranging tenancy signing and key issuing; rent collection. This transfer of administrative responsibilities to the GAS team has speeded up the turn-around on plots and improved efficiency.

2.3 Following reorganisation the new team focused on reducing the length of the waiting list as this was seen as a major problem and the source of many complaints. An Action Plan was drawn up which included measures to address this such as investigating apparently unworked plots, advising tenants in 'unworked plot letters' that their plot could be reduced in size if required, speeding up re-letting of vacant plots, clearing overgrown plots, rationalising the waiting list by asking those on it if they wanted to remain. The Plan included other measures to improve efficiency such as more effective use of the Colony software and development of a closer working relationship with CCT, reviewing the allotment agreement using Focus Groups of plot holders, sending out a 'satisfaction survey' to current plot holders, investigating ways of dealing with irresponsible tenants more effectively, encouraging the development of site associations/site representatives and improving communication with plot holders.

2.4 At present there is no Allotment Strategy though work has started on an 'Open Spaces Strategy' with the Planning and Landscapes Departments taking the lead and the Green Spaces Manager forming part of the project team. The development of an Allotment Strategy should be identified as part of the Open Spaces Action Plan.

3. Consultation and evidence gathering

A number of stakeholders were asked for their views on the effectiveness of the allotment service and the management of the sites. These included Green Spaces officers, plot holders and people on the waiting list, allotment associations and community groups.

3.1 Consultation with officers

We held two meetings with Green Spaces officers, the first to ask a series of questions about various aspects of the allotments service including the waiting list, overgrown plots, resources/officer time, associations/community groups, security. A 'follow-up' meeting updated progress on their Action Plan and we have been in regular communication with Simon Meek, Green Spaces Manager as particular issues and queries have come up. Key points which emerged were:

(1) Staffing - the POSOs manage parks, open spaces and sports provision as well as allotments so inevitably conflicting priorities can become a problem. It is difficult to assess how much time the GAS and CCT staff spend on allotment administration but following the re-organisation of the Customer Contact Department (as per 2.2 above) the through-put has improved.

(2) The length of the waiting list is recognised as a problem and this is being tackled by various means as per Section 2.3 above. A new allotment site at Bowthorpe will become available at some point but this has been delayed pending sale of other land to release the necessary funds with which to set up the site. The use of other land has not been looked into.

(3) Green Spaces has limited resources for clearing overgrown plots so at present they are offering particularly overgrown plots that tenants take on and clear themselves rent free for the second year. BTCV and the probation service have also been used to clear plots. Complaints about apparently unworked/overgrown plots are often a result of not understanding the legal timescales involved in the process of 'plot management' and the stage that the plot might be in the plot management cycle.

(4) Retention of new tenants is a problem on some sites and 'exit surveys' of tenants vacating plots is being considered to try to find out how they might be retained for longer.

3.2 Consultation with plot holders and people on the waiting list

3.2.1 During August and September 2009 we conducted a 'straw poll' of 30 plot holders from 9 allotment sites (Bluebell North & South, Valpy Avenue, Hill Farm, Mousehold South, Catton Grove, Elm Grove Lane, Wall Road and Marston Lane), the majority by visiting the sites and speaking to the plot holders 'in situ' together with some phone interviews. We asked a series of questions (see Appendix 1) and ensured that they knew about the council's impending Satisfaction Survey and encouraged them to complete that too. The key points that emerged were:

(1) A majority (19/30) were positive about the overall service given by the council, rating it good or satisfactory. Most were satisfied with the general maintenance of the sites eg. Verge cutting, path maintenance.

(2) Concerns were raised about:

- Uncompostable rubbish/flytipping – how to get rid of it without a car, the council should take it away especially for new plot holders
- Overgrown and apparently unworked plots
- Lack of support for new plot holders – they should have help with clearing their plot, advice/mentoring, a probationary period as with housing tenants
- Multiple plot holders – officers don't enforce the rules eg. about using plots for commercial gain.
- Availability of water at some sites eg. the last row at Bluebell South, far plots at Catton Grove, 20 plots per tap at Elm Grove Lane
- Site security eg. a thorn hedge between Valpy Avenue plots and Sloughbottom Park would deter vandals

3.2.2 We also asked 6 people on the waiting list a shorter series of questions (see Appendix 2), As we were unable to have access to the names on the list for data protection reasons we did not speak to as many 'waiters' as we would have wished so had to rely on word of mouth. However the key points that emerged from those we did speak to were:

(1) the importance of being kept up-to-date as to their position on the waiting list eg. annually or 6-monthly

(2) a feeling of being 'supported' while they were on the list but once they had been allocated a plot they were then left to fend for themselves

(3) not being told they could have half a plot, the default seems to be one plot rather than asking what area/size they would like

3.3 Allotment associations and community groups

3.3.1 There are currently 5 allotment associations in Norwich, generally representing plot holders on a particular site. The oldest, the Bluebell Model Allotment Gardens Association (founded in 1925) is based at the Bluebell Allotment Hut on the North Site and membership is open to 'all horticulturalists, allotment holders and gardeners' in Norwich. The Cottage Farm Association was set up about 5 years ago and more recently groups have been started (or re-launched) at Valpy Avenue, Elm Grove Lane and Mousehold South. Cottage Farm is currently the only association looking at the possibility of self-management.

We spoke to representatives from Bluebell, Valpy Avenue, Cottage Farm and Elm Grove Lane and the issues brought up by the committee members were very similar to those mentioned by the plot holders themselves ie. unworked plots, inexperienced new plot holders, retention of new tenants, security etc. The associations were trying to address the issue of helping the new plot holders eg. Cottage Farm have 'mentors' who help those who need it and at Elm Grove Lane members cleared 2 overgrown allotments for newcomers. Cllr Bearman had spoken to Bluebell and Elm Grove Lane committee members in February 2008 while gathering information for her council motion and it was heartening to hear that some things were improving eg. the letting of plots seemed faster and there was more communication with the officers. However there were still a lot of apparently unworked plots and new tenants taking on plots which were too big for them.

3.3.2 A number of charitable and community initiatives have been allocated allotments on various sites. These include the Assist Trust, Strong Roots and Stepping Stones who help people with particular needs through 'horticultural therapy' and the Sustainable Living Initiative's (SLI) Grow-Our-Own project. The SLI is a not for profit social enterprise run by volunteers and the main focus of its work at present is on the 'Grow-Our-Own' allotment project which provides support and encouragement to people growing produce on the allotment and in their own gardens. They offer small manageable sized plots, seeds and seedlings and loan of tools as well as hands-on practical advice thus helping novice growers gain confidence and knowledge. About 150 people grow on 17.5 allotments and others help on communal areas such as path maintenance and compost making. The project has installed raised beds and hard standing for people with physical disabilities and members of the mental health charity 'Rethink' garden on one of the plots. 'Transition Norwich' also has a plot which volunteers from the project help and advise with. They hold social events and open days, the 2009 one being attended by visitors (including council officers) from outside Norwich who came to see what has been achieved.

3.4 Other local authorities

In view of the often reported fact that there is a serious shortage of allotments nationally (100,000 on the waiting list), we looked at how some other local authorities in urban areas ran their allotment services. This seems to vary considerably ranging from authorities such as Norwich which own and manage all the allotments (eg. Lincoln), through those which own and manage some (Cambridge, Birmingham, Leicester, Leeds, Bristol) to those in which all the sites are self-managed (Newcastle, Nottingham, Coventry). All the authorities we spoke to had waiting lists of varying

lengths but some also had vacant plots on less popular sites. None appeared to be looking at acquiring more land for statutory allotments but were encouraging various voluntary based schemes such as the GardenShare scheme in Bristol, the 'National GardenShare Community' and the Roundhay Environmental Action Project in Leeds.

3.5 Help available to local authorities

In these difficult financial times all local authorities are having to make savings in all aspects of their work and in most of their services. Unfortunately allotments are not seen as a vital frontline service in spite of all the benefits they bestow, so it is just not practicable to recommend that more resources in the form of money or staff are allocated to them. However there are a number of charities and initiatives that can assist local authorities in their support of allotments and home growing. These include:

- the GardenShare schemes mentioned in 3.4 above
- the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens, a registered charity which supports, represents and promotes community managed farms, gardens, allotments and other green spaces. They will work with any organisation that is running a community garden including local authorities, schools, trusts and housing associations
- the Allotments Regeneration Initiative (ARI) was launched (in 2002) and is managed by the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens on behalf of the Esmée Fairbairn Environment programme. It organises such events as Allotment Officers Forums and Green Community training courses and gives advice on all aspects of allotment management and funding
- the NHS sponsors such health and well-being projects such as the 'Health Walks' which are proving so popular all over Norfolk
- the National Society of Allotment & Leisure Gardeners represents allotment holders and aims to 'protect, promote and preserve allotments'. It also gives information and help with allotment legislation and sources of funding.

4. Conclusions

The Allotments Task & Finish Group has looked at how allotments are managed and used in Norwich. It recognises the hard work that the Green Spaces team have put in to improve the service and that progress has been made on their action plan. Although an action plan has been necessary to put in place some quick fixes and address immediate problems, an allotments strategy, a clear map of the way forward, is vital. Without such a strategy the process of managing allotments becomes one of reacting to events, not controlling them. We have also concluded that improvements could be made with respect to the use of existing allotments, provision of enough allotments to meet the current demand, the promotion of growing-your-own on land other than statutory allotments and investigating resources other than those provided by the council. We have made the following recommendations.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Preparation of an allotments strategy

An allotments strategy which would provide a plan for the future development of the service, a vision of what we want to achieve and the means by which we intend to achieve it should be drawn up and put in place.

5.2 Use of existing allotments

To enable plot holders to get the best out of their allotments it is recommended that:

(1) Plot sizes should be tailored to the needs of those who want them eg. different sized plots to suit differing needs. People on the waiting list should be kept informed of their position on the list on a regular basis. Those who need gardening advice and/or guidance on how to manage an allotment should be 'signposted' to relevant sources by officers. Allotment associations could develop an advisory role with support from officers.

(2) Opportunities for sharing should be allowed eg. community groups and residents associations could take on a plot and divide it up amongst interested members.

(3) It is recommended that the use of those we already have is maximised by clearing all overgrown plots and using 'unusable' ones for something useful eg. Association sheds, composting areas, making leaf mould.

(4) Allotment associations or site representatives should be established for each site as soon as possible. The POSOs should support them by eg. giving them information on external funding for sheds, toilets, sources of help and advice, providing venues for meetings, liaising with local colleges to provide training courses etc. In return the associations could help the POSOs by helping with the site inspections, reporting vandalism, maintenance issues etc and help retain new tenants by offering mentoring help, advice etc.

(5) If an association wants to become self-managed this should be encouraged.

(6) Communication with allotment holders should be improved eg. with a regular newsletter or news update sent out with the tenancy renewal notices.

5.3 Providing enough allotments

The length of the waiting list (currently 500+) clearly demonstrates that at present there are not enough plots to satisfy demand.

(1) Existing initiatives such as the SLI's 'Grow Our Own' project which caters for those who only need a small area of land thus reducing the number of people going on to the waiting list should be encouraged.

(2) The use of other council owned land should be investigated. This could include using housing land near flats currently used for grass/shrub beds as informal allotments for local people or a Community Group. The council should make proposals for looking at their land bank for suitable sites eg. through the Community Engagement Officers.

(3) New temporary sites should be provided on brown field sites eg. where development is not imminent or on unallocated land. Suitable sites should be identified as soon as possible, the current consultation on potential development sites in Norwich offering an ideal opportunity in which to do this. Residents should be encouraged to suggest suitable sites such as unused gardens, roadside verges, unused patches of land. Community growing provision should be made where large scale housing developments are planned. The need for allotment land should be recognised and made a more specific requirement in the Local Development Plan, particularly in those parts of the city with low allotment provision. 'Edible landscaping' such as fruit/nut trees in parks and open spaces should be actively encouraged.

(4) Voluntary initiatives such as GardenShare schemes and community gardens should be encouraged.

5.4 Promotion of 'grow-your-own' and other growing opportunities

Although it might seem to be counter-productive to promote allotments when the waiting list is so long, the website and any publicity material mentioning allotments should emphasise the merits of growing-your-own in the ways listed above in 5.2 and in residents' own gardens however small. Allotments should be celebrated as part of the 'growing-your-own' movement eg. at shows and allotment open days.

5.5 Provision of more resources

(1) External sources of income that are available to local authorities should be investigated eg. the NHS sponsored the Health Walks that are now so popular in Norwich and other parts of Norfolk. The health and other well-being benefits of allotment gardening should be used to attract funding for allotment related projects and the current government policies on healthy eating should be exploited.

(2) Allotment administration should be streamlined so that the POSOs can focus on supporting the associations and helping them to help themselves. Efficiency should be improved by the POSOs being provided with hand held data capture equipment so that plot inspection information etc can be directed straight into Colony instead of via handwritten sheets.

Appendix 1

Allotments T&F group – plot holders survey. Aug/Sept 2009

Allotment site:

Reason for survey – we have been given a task by the Council Scrutiny Committee to look into the provision of allotments in Norwich to see how we can improve the service for plot holders. Could you spare a couple of minutes to answer a few questions?

NB. Tell them that they'll be getting an 'official' Allotment Consultation Survey form from the council with their tenancy renewal letter in October & encourage them to fill it in.

Name:

Phone number:

Address: or street/area

How long have you had an allotment?

What size is it (whole, half, more than one)?

How do you feel about the overall service given by the council?

Management

Is the grass on paths & verges cut regularly?

Water nearby & taps maintained?

(NB. Sheds are no longer the council's responsibility)

How often do you see the Parks & Open Spaces Officer on the site & are they approachable?

Administration

What contact do you have with the council e.g. Letters, e-mails, visit from officer?

If you have a problem eg. Fly-tipping, broken tap, how do you alert the council – by phone, letter etc, and what sort of response do you get?

Other

Is there an allotment association on the site?

If so, do you belong to it and what benefits do you get?

If not why not?

If there isn't – is there a site representative?

Would you like to be a site rep or see an association start up & would you be prepared to be involved in running it?

What do you think could be improved?

Eg. site maintenance, admin/contact with council, advice for new plot holders

Any other comments

Appendix 2

Allotments T&F group – survey for people on waiting list. Aug/Sept 2009

Reason for survey – we have been given a task by the Council Scrutiny Committee to look into the provision of allotments in Norwich to see how we can improve the service for plot holders. Could you spare a couple of minutes to answer a few questions?

Name:

Phone number:

Address: or street/area

How long have you been on the waiting list for an allotment?

What size have you applied for (whole, half, more than one)?

Did you specify which site you wanted?

Have you had any contact with the council since you applied e.g. A letter from the council asking if you wanted to stay on the list?

How do you think the council could have handled your enquiry/the maintenance of the waiting list better?

Any other comments