

## RESIDENTS' SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE - ALLOTMENTS UPDATE

<b>Committee name</b>	Residents' Services Select Committee
<b>Officer reporting</b>	Stuart Hunt – Head of Green Spaces
<b>Papers with report</b>	Appendix 1 – Map of Allotment Sites in the Borough Appendix 2 – Statistical Data of current provision
<b>Ward</b>	All

### HEADLINES

The purpose of this report is to update Members on the allotments provision within the Borough.

### RECOMMENDATION:

That the Committee notes the update set out in the report.

### SUPPORTING INFORMATION

This report is accompanied by:

Appendix 1 - Map of Allotment Sites in the Borough  
Appendix 2 – Statistical Data of current provision

### Allotment management is classified as:

**Scheme A** - a 'semi-devolved' scheme was identified for 7 sites with small allotment associations and committees who agreed to have a presence on site to be able to manage specific areas such as non-cultivation issues with tenants on behalf of the Council. The Council retains the administration of tenancy agreements, collection of rents and notices to quit elements of the process.

**Scheme B** – a fully devolved scheme which involves the management of a further 7 sites by allotment associations who manage their own waiting lists, letting of plots, collection of rents, non-cultivation and notices to quit where necessary. The allotment associations retain the rental from plots which supports site maintenance.

*NB: The Scheme A and Scheme B Agreements are currently under review by the Council's Legal services*

**Council Managed Allotment Sites** – in addition to the 7 semi-devolved sites and the 7 fully devolved sites, the Council's Green Spaces Service also manages 28 allotment garden sites (approximately 1300 tenants) on a day-to-day basis.

## **Background:**

The original Green Spaces Allotment Officer post was deleted approximately 6 years ago, with the allotments work being distributed between two Green Spaces officers to manage in addition to their existing roles.

In 2019/2020 and the first part of 2021, during the pandemic, many tenants were unable to tend to their plots due to Government restrictions and/or self-isolation.

During this period the Green Spaces officers were able to visit and assess allotment sites and individual plots; however, they were not able to issue non-cultivation notices as a result of the pandemic restrictions.

In February 2021, a review of the allotments process was instigated. A need for a stand-alone allotment mailbox was highlighted to ensure timely management and responses to numerous emails being sent by tenants to individual Green Spaces officers and the contact centre.

This piece of work also included a review of the Allotment Garden Plot Tenancy List. This included establishing contact with all tenants via either email, phone or letter which resulted in several concerns being highlighted at all sites including subletting of plots, vacant plots being cultivated by persons unknown, tenants having passed away, alongside uncultivated plots and non-payments of rents etc.

Additionally, the original Allotment Garden Tenancy Agreement and associated Terms and Conditions were also reviewed, with newly created versions being ratified by the Council's legal service. These are currently being rolled out for new tenants and will also, in time, be issued to all existing tenants.

In addition to the above, agreements and terms and conditions for keeping chickens and bees were also created and existing tenants who have chickens or bees are being asked to complete these retrospectively so full records for each allotment garden plot are complete.

In May 2021, Green Spaces were directed to open an online waiting list for all Borough allotments with the view to allocating vacant plots. Unfortunately, at this time one of the Green Spaces officers was on long term sick and the other took a secondment opportunity to another team, therefore there was no resource available to visit and inspect sites, issue non-cultivation notices and notices to quit to enable the identification of vacant plots.

The online waiting lists grew very quickly with demand being approximately three times greater than availability of vacant plots; however, there was no officer resource available to carry out the work required in order to allocate plots.

In addition to the online applications, all waiting lists that had previously been held by the 7 semi-devolved sites were also brought in house to ensure a fair and equitable process would be in place when plots were eventually allocated.

In September 2021, Green Spaces requested a review of the Allotment Service by the Internal Audit Team. The outcome of the audit supported the concerns that had been highlighted as a result of the review of the Allotments Tenancy List and made recommendations, including the need to have a dedicated allotment officer, to resolve and manage the issues going forward.

In July 2022, an agency allotment officer was engaged for the sole purpose of assessing each site, identifying those plots that had been left uncultivated to establish vacancies in order to allocate to those on the waiting lists.

Since that time 9 sites have been assessed (highlighted blue on the attached spreadsheet) and the following work undertaken.

### **1. Non - cultivation issues being addressed**

This includes a review of all tenanted plots to ensure that they are up to the required cultivated standard.

Currently 14 sites have been assessed for non-cultivation and **56 non-cultivation notices** have been issued so far which have resulted in 38 plots showing vast improvement. The remaining 18 have not responded to the non-cultivation notices and will therefore be issued written warnings.

NB: There may be various reasons as to why a percentage of those written to do not respond to non-cultivation notices being issued. For example, history has shown that those tenants who are over 65 and who do not pay rent are far less committed to engage than those that do. The work to establish contact in instances of no response means further investigation and consultation with colleagues in Electoral Services, Council Tax etc to see if they are still registered in Hillingdon before any process can be put in place to take back the plot.

On many occasions tenants have been found to have moved away from the Borough and have left without notice.

The process for non-cultivation is lengthy with tenants being given one month to make satisfactory improvements and then, if no improvement has been made, a warning letter is sent with a further one-month improvement timeline. It is hoped that during this period the tenants will wish to keep their allotments and take the necessary steps to cultivate their plots accordingly; however, if they do not, a Notice to Quit is issued which gives a further one month's notice to leave site and a notice put on the plot advising that it will revert to the Council on a specified date. Therefore, this process can take at least 3 calendar months to realise (or more if there is an appeal).

### **2. The Waiting Lists/Vacant Plots**

The attached spreadsheet shows an original number of 1010 people on the waiting lists for allotments. However, upon contacting 246 of those people to offer plots it has been established that 128 were not actually viable (for example, not living in the Borough, already had plots elsewhere, one person who wanted to build a house on the land and one who wanted to start up a double-glazing company), 62 of those on the list either declined or did not respond and 56 have taken up plots.

The waiting lists now stand at 764 with only potentially 347 vacant plots. However, the allotment officer has noticed that a number of plots are only being partially cultivated (often with the rest of the plot being left to grass) and when asked, tenants have advised that they often find a full size plot too much for them to manage therefore, the allotment service has started splitting vacant plots to a) make the area more easily manageable for tenants and b) to increase the number of plots available to accommodate those on the waiting lists.

This has been a successful exercise on both Ashford Avenue and Hill End Allotment Sites where we have been able to re-open the waiting lists for both sites.

### **3. The Waiting List process:**

It should be noted that the waiting list process is also lengthy and administratively demanding - each person is given 48 hours to respond so for each of the 62 people who either declined or did not respond the process had to start again, with the next people on the waiting lists given a further 48 hours to respond.

Once someone shows interest in a plot, a site visit is booked with the Allotment Officer so the plot can be viewed – this is essential as experience has shown that whilst a lot of people have a 'good life' fantasy when it comes to allotments, a number of people decline at this stage once they realise just how much work is involved and when this happens, the process has to start again.

Following the potential tenant agreeing to the plot, ID (proof of address, proof of date of birth and/or proof of disability if claiming concession) is requested. Again, this is essential to ensure compliance with the allotment waiting list criteria. Once the ID has been validated, tenancy agreements and keys can be issued, and contact details issued to finance so that an invoice (if under 65 years of age) can be issued.

### **4. Notices to Quit**

Eighteen notices to quit have been issued in 2022 for non-payment of rent.

### **5. Fees and Charges**

Fees and charges have remained frozen for several years. By law, allotment garden plot tenants must be given 1 years notice of any rise in fees.

50% rental discounts are offered to all residents in receipt of Universal Credit/PIP and those residents aged between 60 and 64 years. Allotments are offered free to those over the age of 65.

All the fully devolved sites (under Scheme B) are reimbursed annually by the Council for the tenants on their sites that attract concessions which goes towards onsite maintenance and ensures that the Allotment Associations are not financially penalised.

Whilst the above highlights several of the process areas dealing with allocation and management of plots there are still many and varied day to day issues to deal with such as

email responses (approximately 400 a month), site visits, repairs/faults, individual tenant and whole site problems so although vast progress has been made across the whole of the allotments service there are no short cuts to be had and each part of the process must be managed properly and efficiently to ensure consistency at each site.

### **Implications on related Council policies**

A role of the Select Committees is to make recommendations on service changes and improvements to the Cabinet who are responsible for the Council's policy and direction.

### **How this report benefits Hillingdon residents**

None at this stage - information only report.

### **Financial Implications**

None at this stage.

### **Legal Implications**

None at this stage.

### **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Nil.