

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Neighbourhood and Community Services Scrutiny Panel

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WARD(S): All

PART I **FOR COMMENT & CONSIDERATION**

SLOUGH ALLOTMENTS

1. **Purpose of Report**

In October 2015 Officers presented a 'state of play' report in relation to allotments. At this meeting Officers informed the Panel that action was being taken to re-address the issues of concern. Scrutiny panel highlighted the following points that they wanted Officers to report back on the following:

- Undertakings given in October 2015 regarding vacant plots and those waiting for allotments.
- The lack of a dedicated officer, and the problems regarding the cost efficiency of the service, had led to it losing priority in Slough Borough Council (SBC) plans. Members wished to discuss whether the service was sustainable, cost effective and could benefit from increased one-off fees or more radical reshaping of the service (e.g. adoption of a social enterprise model).
- Whether some renting allotments were using them primarily for fly tipping.

This report addresses the points raised above as well as providing a general update on Allotments.

2. **Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action**

- The Panel is requested to comment on the report and progress made.

3. **The Slough Joint Wellbeing Strategy, the JSNA and the Five Year Plan**

3a. **Slough Joint Wellbeing Strategy Priorities**

Priority 3. Improving mental health and wellbeing

Allotments are considered to be an extremely valuable recreational and leisure asset enjoyed by people of all ages from all walks of life. As one might expect, however, a fairly high proportion of tenants are retired, and it is no exaggeration to say that for them such an activity is absolutely invaluable, and for many irreplaceable.

The potential role for allotments within the promotion of public health is important when considering the evidence of the contribution that allotment gardening can make to physical and mental good health.

Gardening is identified as one of the Health Education Council's recommended forms of exercise for the over 50s age-group. In view of changing demographics, the role of allotments is becoming increasingly important as a low-cost form of exercise which is both available to, and popular with older people.

JSNA areas addressed:

- Lifestyles – 20% of all death in England are due to poor diet – only 2 in 5 adults in Slough claim to eat the recommended 5-a-day fruit and vegetables
- 31% of adults spend less than half an hour a week being active

3b. Five Year Plan Outcomes

- More people will take responsibility and manage their own health, care and support needs

As explained above, Allotments play a major role in residents being 'more active more often. This physical activity added to by the dietary benefits of eating fresh food and in particular fruit and vegetables contributes to Slough changing its current high levels of obesity.

4. Other Implications

(a) Financial

Currently a £58k budget is allocated to Allotments. This year considerably more has been spent on allotments particularly in relation to staff time

(b) Risk Management

Not applicable in relation to this report

(c) Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications

There are no human rights act implications in relation to this report

(d) Equalities Impact Assessment

Slough allotments should be seen as a model of good practice in relation to community cohesion. Our sites have active plot holders from a wide range of communities.

The best allotment societies often play a wider role in community schemes, becoming involved in initiatives with local schools, community composting, as well as programmes for the mentally and physically ill or disabled.

Allotments have a historical and cultural role; there is an important part of allotment life which is about heritage and the values and identity which has developed in many people across the country.

5. Supporting Information

- 5.1 In early 2016 a joint working group was established between the Slough Allotments Federation and Slough Borough Council. This partnership has transformed the relationship between the Federation and the Council and has led to significant progress being made.
- 5.2 The Council highly values the voluntary contribution that the Federation has made and continues to make without which significant progress would not have been made. Officers from the Parks & Open Spaces also need to be commended on their contribution and support to enable the progress to have been made.

Dedicated Officer Time

- 5.3 Over the last 8 months the Council has allocated 0.5 Full Time Equivalent officer time to be dedicated to Allotments and in addition this has been supported through administrative support. The level of resource allocated has been a short term measure to bring allotments back to a well managed position. The time allocated will be reviewed prior to the new financial year.

Fee Increase and developing a sustainable model

- 5.4 It is the Council's aspiration to have self managed sites. Whilst the Slough Allotments Federation has shown a tremendous amount of commitment they have also expressed a wish not to deal with the financial aspects of site management.

Fly tipping, and whether this was the primary purpose for which some renting allotments were using plots

- 5.5 The change in culture in managing waste, the introduction of inspections, the active role of the SAF and the collaborative work between SAF and the Council is seeing a demonstrable reduction in fly tipping and general waste mountains.

5.6 Key Actions

Issue or area that needed attention	Position at Nov 2015	Position at Dec 2016	Other Comments
Waste	Waste seen as a major issue across allotment sites - contaminated green waste from communal waste areas and plots	Waste cleared from all affected sites at by SBC Waste cleared from Spencer Road resulted in site being re-opened up	Joint working between the Parks & Open Spaces team & SAF to reinforce the culture around waste – Allotment holders responsible for clearance of their own waste.

Waiting lists	959 applications outstanding	121 applicants currently on waiting list.	Letters sent to all 959 applicants on waiting list summer 2016 to ask if they wish to remain on waiting list. 265 responded "Yes" although a small number are from the same address
Available plots (vacancies)	180 (Dec 15)	265 plot vacancies	<p>The major issue was that the size of the waiting list significantly outweighed the number of available plots.</p> <p>Due to a range of measures undertaken including enforcement of tenancy – a greater number of plots have become available. This will increase following the next stages of uncultivated plot clearances.</p> <p>By end of Feb 2017 all people on the existing waiting list will have been offered a plot – although in many cases it may not be on their preferred site.</p>
Inspections	<p>Only spot inspections of some debtors plots carried out (est. No. 30 plots)</p> <p>Previous to this inspections were undertaken by the Allotments Officer</p>	<p>SBC conducted an A external inspection in Jan 2016 and re-introduced grading standards to allotments. This has now been followed up by Photographic</p>	<p>SAF carried out 2 photographic inspections and provided before and after Mal Cultivation Notice (MCN's) status reports for all SBC managed sites enabling MCN's and subsequent termination letters to</p>

		<p>inspection of 538 untidy or poorly cultivated plots. A further photographic inspection of "C" and "D" grade plots carried out</p> <p>All plot holders who's plot did not meet cultivation standards A or B are now served improvement notices</p>	<p>be issued by the Parks & Open Spaces Team</p> <p>Systems and process are now in place in partnership between the Parks & open Spaces Team and the SAF to deal with uncultivated plots</p>
Number of uncultivated plots	<p>SBC information unavailable as general conditional survey inspections not carried out in 2015</p> <p>This was previously undertaken by the Allotments Officer</p>	265 + 60 borderline	<p>Tenants with uncultivated plots were served notice to either bring up to speed within a month or contracts terminated.</p> <p>This will be ongoing practice</p>
Enforcement/Terminations	27 debtors terminated	<p>227 tenancies terminated (predominantly mal-cultivations)</p> <p>Approx. 60 warning letters to be issued to tenants of borderline plots</p>	<p>Includes small number of tenants who have swapped plots.</p> <p>Letters to tenants of borderline plots are being sent out Jan 17</p>
Tool sheds	No clear procedures in place to illustrate who was tenant of a tool shed	Tool shed management in place on 3 sites and a further two sites where tool shed management is being introduced.	
Security	Burglaries and thefts	Mobile CCTV cameras introduced to some sites	There has been teething problems with the cameras, these are being

			rectified
Management System	The Parks & Open Spaces Team Purchase Colony – the new management system for Allotments	Usage of Colony has been implemented. There has been a number of teething problems.	Working with IT so resolutions can be secured to ensure we are able to take full advantage of the Colony System

5.6 The next steps include the following:

- Continue to proactively work with the Slough Allotment Federation and the Independent Cowper Road Site.
- Produce clear process and procedures that will provide clear clarity and ease management functions across all sites
- Promote the positive contribution to Slough that allotment holders and the SAF create
- Develop a clear and sustainable business plan moving forward.

6. **Comments of Other Committees**

No other committees have discussed this report.

7. **Conclusion**

There has been significant progress made over the last year on ensuring allotments are seen and valued as a key contributor to the Councils 5 year plan and Slough's Wellbeing Strategy. Priority over the last year has focussed on:

- Ensuring standards are identified, applied and adhered to
- Effective management
- Developing a collaborative approach between the Council and Slough Allotments Federation

SBC will shortly be in a position that we have more plots available than people on the waiting list. Our priorities over the next year will ensure that the allotments are managed effectively, are promoted and that we build on the collaborative work with the Slough Allotments Federation.

Without the commitment of the Slough Allotments Federation and the Council's Parks and Open Spaces team, the progress made over the last year would not have been achieved.