

To: Cabinet

Date: 9 March 2022

Report/Comments of: Scrutiny Committee

Title: Allotment Service

SUMMARY OF REPORT CONSIDERED	
Report Title:	Update on Allotments
Purpose/Description of Report:	To provide feedback to Members on the status of the allotment service provided by the Council.
Key Decision:	N/A
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor R Child
Relevant Portfolio Holder:	Councillor R Bindloss

1. Introduction and Overview

The Scrutiny Committee met on 22 February 2022 to consider the update report on the allotment service provided by the Council.

The report summarised the location of allotment sites, condition and accessibility, occupancy levels, current charging structure, income from fees and expenditure. It outlined the process for creating a new allotment site or decommissioning an existing site. It also identified future considerations for members of the Committee to provide steer on.

2. Summary of Feedback/Recommendations for Cabinet Consideration

(Where appropriate, if an Officer response was given, it will be highlighted in yellow. It is important to note that the Officer response may have been provided since the meeting.)

- The comment was made that the service has recorded a profit for the past six years but when factoring support costs into the equation, the service recorded a loss each year.
- Fencing improvements are expected to cost the Council approximately £50k, if progressed and the question was asked, if the sites were self-managed by

allotment associations, then the Council would not have all the staff costs associated with running them and they would be able to recoup the fencing costs over a number of years.

- Another comment was made that the idea of self-managed allotment associations is worth exploring, although it was recognised that getting allotment holders to take on the responsibility was difficult due to issues, for example vandalism.
- A Member commented that they were appalled by the report because of the following points:
 - The fencing costs quoted appeared to be inflated. The Director for Growth and Regeneration stated that the costs are estimated and will be subject to a procurement process. It was confirmed that currently there is no budget allocated for fencing.
 - There was no mention of the allotment competition the Council used to hold. The Director for Growth and Regeneration stated that the Council currently hasn't got the resources to run such a competition.
 - Also the report states that the service has nowhere to place raised beds but does not mention whether Officers have asked other allotment holders to relocate so that raised beds could be installed. The Director for Growth and Regeneration stated that the call for relocation will be made to assess the potential for such development.
 - No mention is made of the Council's relations with allotment holders and they have informed Members that they believe the Council are not interested in them. The Director for Growth and Regeneration stated that the Council have received no complaints regarding allotment services in the past 3 years.
- A comment was made that the Council should ensure that if the fencing to be erected, it is high security fencing to protect the allotments from vandalism.
- Disappointment was expressed that fencing and repairs could cost the Council approximately £50k, when it might have cost less if repairs were done more regularly. The Director for Growth and Regeneration stated that the Corporate Assets Team was created in April 2020 to provide focus on such general fund assets. Condition surveys are recently carried out which has identified the repairs. The repairs are not considered urgent or a health and safety risk and therefore no budget allocation has been made for these works in the 2022/23 financial year.
- Members sought reassurance that the allotments wouldn't be used for housing development. The Director for Growth and Regeneration stated that the sites are statutory allotment sites and can't be used for housing development unless Council decides to decommission them and then a thorough legal process would have to be followed.
- The comment was made that there are more allotments planned as a result of the MMDR development is encouraging.

- Support was expressed for shorter term tenancies, as the Council might be able to regain the tenancy more quickly especially if an allotment holder allows their site to fall into disrepair. **The Director for Growth and Regeneration stated that current leases are for an indefinite period.**
- The outstanding debt of the allotment service stands at £822, with approximately 50 different debts written off over the last few years. The concern was raised that with 10% of tenants paying in arrears, that the Council would struggle to obtain payment at the end of their tenancy.

Written by: Scrutiny Committee Chairman in consultation with Members of the Scrutiny Committee