

Meeting: ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE

Portfolio Area: Environment & Regeneration

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REVIEW OF ALLOTMENTS

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1 PURPOSE

1.1 To consider the recommendations of the Scrutiny review into Stevenage Allotments.

2 BACKGROUND & SCRUTINY ISSUE IDENTIFIED

2.1 The issue of scrutinising allotments was agreed by the Select Committee as a scrutiny review item along with other scrutiny items when it met on 22 March 2016.

2.2 Scope and Focus of the review

2.2.1 The Committee met on 4 July 2016 and agreed a scope for the review of allotments, which it agreed should consider the following areas:

- *How well are the current arrangements with Stevenage Garden & Allotments Association (SG&AA) administering the running of the allotments scheme since they took over its administration some 18 months ago?*
- *What are the future plans for Stevenage Allotments?*
- *How secure is the future of Stevenage Allotments, pressure to use land for residential use?*
- *Are there good practices as a Co-operative Council that could be replicated elsewhere?*
- *Are there examples of best practice in other authorities re allotments that could be adopted in Stevenage?*
- *Numbers on the waiting list*

2.3 Process of the review

2.3.1 The Committee met on 5 occasions to undertake the review. The Committee met as follows: On 4 July to agree the scope and receive an officer presentation on the service, on the 5 September to carry out a site visit, on 29 September and 15 November 2016 to interview officers and discuss findings and finally on 18 January 2017 to sign off and agree the report and recommendations of the review.

2.3.2 The Committee received written and oral evidence from the following people:

- Head of Environmental Services, Lee Myers
- Environmental Performance & Development Manager, Julia Hill
- Members of Stevenage Gardens and Allotments Association
- Allotment hirers

3 REVIEW FINDINGS

3.1 Conclusions of the Environment & Economy Select Committee

3.1.1 Based on the input provided to Members conducting the review by Officers supporting the review the Committee have made the following conclusions.

3.1.2 Consider the relationship between SGAA and SBC

3.1.3 The review sought to establish “*How well are the current arrangements with Stevenage Garden & Allotments Association (SG&AA) administering the running of the allotments scheme since they took over its administration some 18 months ago?*”

3.1.4 The review met with members of the SG&AA and independently canvassed them for their view on how well they found the new arrangements with their day to day running of the allotment scheme and whether they felt they received enough support from the Council in their management role.

3.1.5 Since April 2013 SGAA have been managing the following aspects of the service: Lettings; Waiting list; Invoicing and collection of rents and deposits; notices to cultivate; notices to quit; applications for allotment structures; and enquiries and complaints concerning these services.

3.1.6 SBC continue to manage the following services: Scheduled works; maintenance of infrastructure; reactive works - in response to requests from SGAA; managing relationship with SGAA; arbitrators for complaints; delivery of capital projects; liaising with planning and developers; and overseeing and maintaining IT systems.

3.1.7 Members were of the view that the responses received from SG&AA were positive and the new management arrangements were an improvement on

the former regime, as they had more of an influence on the way that the allotment sites were run which reflected their direct knowledge of what works best on the sites with regard to managing the sites.

3.1.8 Members were also impressed with the customer feedback of how SGAA are running the service from the 2014 Allotment Holders Survey, with 86% rating the allotment service as good or excellent.

3.1.9 Future Plans for Allotments and how secure are the sites from development pressure?

- *What are the future plans for Stevenage Allotments?*
- *How secure is the future of Stevenage Allotments, pressure to use land for residential use?*

3.1.10 Members were advised by officers that there would be a development of an Allotment Strategy covering the next decade from 2016 – 2026. The strategy would address: disposal of non-compostable allotment waste; facilities for disabled or less abled plot holders; communications; allotment charges; levels of sustainability; demand for allotments; future maintenance and management; managing expectations; managing sites for wildlife; review of administration processes and partnership working.

3.1.11 Nationally it is still quite rare for land to be given over for development and there are strict rules governing the change of use, as such the decision is subject to approval by the Secretary of State. Since 2010 to 2014 in the UK close to 3,000 plots were sold for development. However, in these cases alternative provision must be allocated by the local authority to replace the lost plots. Officers informed Members that there are currently no plans to sell off any plots for development.

3.1.12 The popularity of allotment holding ebbs and flows, the peak was in post war Britain, with 1.4 million allotment holders in 1949 to around 150,000 today. By the mid 1990's there were on average 4 people waiting for every 100 plots. By 2014 this figure had risen to 54. However, locally the numbers of people on the waiting lists has shrunk. Officers informed Members that in Stevenage, since 2012 there has been a slow and steady decline in numbers of people on the waiting list. This is, in part, due a tailing off of interest in allotments, which is following the national trend. However, it may also be due to changes in our procedures and processes, for example, plot splitting, and better efficiency in evicting tenants for non-cultivation of their plots. In Stevenage, at its peak, in 2011, there were over 400 people on the waiting list, but this has reduced to 146 by January 2016.

3.1.13 2014 Allotment Users Survey

The review agreed to consider the findings of the 2014 Allotment Users Survey which had revealed that 82% of respondents rated the overall impression of their site as being good or excellent. 94% felt that the current allotment charge offers good value for money. 55% of respondents have not

noticed any difference in allotment administration since SGAA took over this function in April 2013, and 39% felt that it had improved. 68% of respondents felt that the Council need to provide a mechanism for the disposal of non-compostable waste. However, 47% said that they would not be willing to pay extra for such a service.

3.1.14 Members noted that the responses for how the allotment holders felt the charges offered value for money could well be different if the survey was completed in the current year following the increases in charges.

3.1.15 Members raised the issue of central charges which they understood was not a matter that Environmental Services Officers had influence over, but they commented that they thought these fees were on the high side for the cost of the overall service. The service in 2016-17 costs £81,000 a year to provide, of which £23,000 is controllable costs, £24,000 is management costs and £33,000 is for central charges for services such as corporate Accountants, Human Resources, Legal etc. and for depreciation.

3.1.16 Officers stated that under the current arrangements it would not be possible to run the service in a cost neutral way as the fees for keeping an allotment were not meant to cover all of the costs of the service. If this were the case then the fees would need to be set at far too high a level to be sustainable in attracting allotment users.

3.2 Attracting the next generation of allotment holders

3.2.1 The review showed that interest in allotment holding ebbs and flows over the years, so it is important to keep an eye on trends but also on attracting the next generation of allotment holders. To this end, Members were keen to make links between schools and the SGAA to establish ways to encourage young people to take up gardening and keeping allotments, as a way of widening the demographics of allotment users.

3.2.2 The review did not wish to be too prescriptive about how SBC Environment Officers and SGAA volunteers should do this, but schemes that encourage SBC officers and SGAA volunteers to visit schools, following the appropriate DBS checks, to encourage and train pupils to set up their own allotment patches within schools grounds, with schools that are interested in participating, would be a good start.

3.3 Comparison with other local authorities

3.3.1 Officers stated that with regards to other Hertfordshire authorities it is difficult to make a meaningful comparison as the composition of the other Councils is very different to Stevenage. That said, Stevenage is more expensive per square metre than Harlow, with charges of 18p per square metre or £41.25 for a 125sqm plot, compared with £45.00 for a full plot of 250sqm in Harlow. However, Stevenage is significantly cheaper than Basildon which is £56 per square metre for a small plot, £84 for a medium plot & £112 per square metre for a large plot.

3.4 Equalities & Diversity issues

- 3.4.1 Members discussed what provision there is for disabled people. It was noted that the improvements that had been carried out following the £660,000 capital improvements, including improved access, roadways, parking and paths had made a significant improvement for all users, but clearly this had helped people with disability regarding access to sites. Members also noted that officers have earmarked providing improved access for the disabled as a future development of the Allotment Strategy 2016-2026, and they warmly welcomed this commitment and suggested that they would revisit this issue at a future committee meeting when they would be monitoring progress against the review recommendations.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 That the Environment & Economy Select Committee considers the findings of the review, contained within this report and the recommendations below be presented to the Executive Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration and the Strategic Director (Environment) and that a response be provided from these and any other named officers and partners within two months of the publishing of this report.
- 4.2 That Members and officers work with the Stevenage Gardens and Allotments Association and local schools to establish ways to encourage young people to take up gardening and keeping allotments, as a way of widening the demographics of allotment users.
- 4.3 That officers explore the possibility of working with Stevenage Gardens and Allotments Association to explore the possibility of Community Ownership of Allotments.
- 4.4 That officers revisit the current Appeals arrangements to improve and speed up the process.
- 4.5 That officers discuss with Stevenage Gardens and Allotments Association ways in which overgrown allotments might be tidied up (without using a cultivator that spread weeds) to encourage new allotment hirers to take on new allotment strips.
- 4.6 That officers work with the Stevenage Gardens and Allotments Association to consider ways in which new allotment hirers could be trained to gain the basic understanding and knowledge to work an allotment successfully.
- 4.7 That officers consider what measures can be taken to direct allotment holders to publicly available toilets in the area, as any further onsite provision is not viable within the current budgetary restraints, but better information such as a map would be helpful.

- 4.8 That, building on the achievements already made, officers consider along with Stevenage Gardens and Allotments Association, ways in which the security can be improved and vandalism designed out of the allotment sites.
- 4.9 That a detailed breakdown of the internal service charges be provided to Members of the E&E Select Committee in order that they can better understand why this makes up the largest proportion of the Allotment services overall costs.
- 4.10 That improved facilities for disabled plot holders will be monitored by Members when they revisit the review at a future meeting of the Environment & Economy Select Committee.

5 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial Implications

The are no direct financial implications for this report.

5.2 Legal Implications

There are no direct legal implications for this report.

5.3 Equalities Implications

The Equalities implications have been addressed within the report at paragraph 3.4. There are no further equalities implications for this report.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Notes of the Committee meetings held on 4 July, 5 & 29 September, 15 November 2016, and 18 January 2017.

APPENDICES Appendix A – Scrutiny Scoping Proforma