



Allotment Provision in Wirral

Report of the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee

September 2020



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

As part of the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme in 2019/20, Members identified a need for further review of the provision of allotment sites across the Borough; with a view to focusing specifically on capacity, demand and key areas of improvement within the current system. A Task and Finish Panel was established in July 2020, with Members of the Task & Finish Panel agreeing a comprehensive review scope; including a plan of engagement with representatives of allotment societies and site secretary groups to recognise issues currently faced and how these might be addressed.

2.0 BACKGROUND

2.1 The Impact of Allotments on Health and Wellbeing and the Local Environment

There have been a number of studies undertaken around the benefits of maintaining an allotment for individuals, as well as how sites impact on the local area and natural environment; with results detailing reductions in depression and anxiety, improved social functioning and even increased opportunities for vocational development, amongst other benefits. A UK based case-control study carried out in 2015 and published in the Oxford Journal of Public Health sought to assess the health and wellbeing benefits of allotment gardening by comparing pre and post session moods and wellbeing for regular allotment gardeners against a matched control of non-gardeners recruited as volunteers from a local supermarket. The findings of this study suggested that benefits to mood, self-esteem and other indicators of wellbeing improved significantly for the allotment gardeners between pre and post session measurement. In addition, these benefits can be felt almost immediately and generally the length of time as a plot holder has no direct bearing on the advantages. Alongside helping to combat loneliness and enable residents to contribute to society, particularly in retirement, the physical benefits of regular spells of gardening help plot holders to keep fit and to prevent cognitive decline, as well as building levels of vitamin D by outside working.

Amid population growth, there is increasing pressure on green spaces and allotments can provide a high level of conservational value as important wildlife habitats in urban areas; encouraging birds, mammals, and amphibia as well as supporting pollinators and bees. In the wake of a global climate emergency, organic and sustainable allotment gardening is a collective step for communities to take to reduce the local area's contribution to climate change and for residents to reduce their carbon footprint.

2.2 Local Authority Statutory Requirements

The history of allotments dates back hundreds of years, with the system currently used today based on the nineteenth century model. The Allotments Act 1925 established formal legislation that meant that local authorities could not sell or convert allotments, and also that town-planning authorities should give special consideration to allotments

when preparing their town planning, which as a consequence is now relevant to the Council's Unitary Development Plan and Local Development Framework.

Since the initial inception of the Allotments Act of 1925, there have been numerous revisions to strengthen this legislation over the years; relating in part to provision, notices to quit and planning. Allotment sites are designated as statutory or temporary; statutory sites are those that have been acquired by the Council for the purpose of being allotment gardens and are directly protected by the Allotment Acts whereas temporary sites are not. Case law indicates that allotment sites that have been in existence for more than thirty years are deemed to be statutory, with the vast majority of Wirral's allotment sites deemed to be statutory.

Wirral Council has a statutory duty to provide allotments where there is demand, and when faced with this demand, must endeavour to acquire suitable land or take a lease or tenancy of land for this purpose, with failure to meet such a demand theoretically leaving the authority open to challenge by way of judicial review in the High Court.

2.3 Current Allotment Provision on Wirral

On Wirral, there are currently 1,767 lettable plots over 41 Council managed sites – with a notable increase in interest in allotments since the announcement of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in March 2020, with 813 applications for a plot being made between March and July 2020. At present, there are 8 plots at the Church Street site which provide disabled access.

Although the global pandemic has highlighted to many that sustainable home-grown produce can be preferable to a reliance on imported food supplies, a survey of local authorities and their allotments from 2015 (as referenced in the King's Fund study '*Gardens and Health*') confirms that there has been a steady increase in demand over a number of years. For many Councils, this increase has been difficult to deal with and the survey stated that more than 30% of local authorities that responded said they had between 100 and 400 people waiting for plots, while 8.5% had more than 1,000 people waiting. On Wirral, as of August 2020, figures show that there are 1,704 applicants on the waiting list for an allotment plot across the Borough, with the most sought after areas for applicants being Wallasey and West Kirby. The Parks and Countryside Team have reduced the numbers waiting by 140 prior to August 2020 through an audit of the list to confirm contact details and to reconfirm an applicant's intention to take up a plot if offered.

The rental cost of an allotment in Wirral is currently £65.00 per year for a full plot, and £32.50 for a half plot.

Wirral Council's Joint Partnership Allotments Strategy and Improvement Plan was published in 2015, following a review of the Council's allotment processes, and links to the Parks and Open Spaces Strategy. This strategy set out a number of objectives, aims and aspirations in relation to creating and maintaining a high standard of allotment

provision for the benefit of Wirral residents – notably by “improving the infrastructure, facilities, security and quality of allotment sites and ensuring optimum use is made of existing allotment provision through reducing the number of vacant and ‘unusable’ plots”. At the meeting of the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2020, the following update on the immediate and long-term aims of the strategy was provided for Members;

Short Term Aims of the Allotment Strategy

Five-year aim	Comments
Implement the use of a new Allotment Computer system and keep it up to date, include all relevant allotment documentation.	This has been completed, Colony has now been installed as the new allotment computer system.
Revise (and regularly update) the allotment pages of Wirral’s website, to provide appropriate information for plot holders and people interested in taking on an allotment.	The allotments pages are regularly updated, the Wirral allotment society are notified of numbers on waiting lists.
Update the sectional maps of each site, with a site map and a diagrammatical sketch plan of each site, on a regular basis	This is still an ongoing process, all sites have been renumbered and some sites have new site maps.
Implement effective administration and maintenance of allotment sites in line with this strategy and the procedures set out in the appendices. Create a 5-year allotment site improvement plan for each non self-managed site with input from the site secretary, plot holders, the site’s allotment society (where one exists), neighbours and other interested parties. Prioritising the sites needing most attention (e.g. Sumner Road, St James, Lansdowne Place, Carrodus, Bedford Road).	This is completed on a daily basis; the colony system has helped implement effective administration as it is a lot more advanced than the previous system. Team Leaders have created improvement plans for each of their sites, prioritising sites where works needs carrying out and those that need attention.
Introduce use of secure keys that cannot have copies cut to stop dumping and reduce vandalism.	We have introduced a combi lock trial, where tenants are given the combination and it is changed when new influx of tenants, it has been successful on sites to avoid dumping and vandalism and reduces money spent on keys.

Provide updated information regarding waiting lists for each site on a regular basis, including providing a copy to the Wirral Allotment Society, so that this information can assist people considering applying for an allotment.	This is done regularly, lists are sent to site secretaries, this is to provide them with all their tenants details, waiting lists and vacant plots, the Wirral allotment Society is also provided with waiting lists and vacant plots.
Carry out piloting of a range of cost effective methods of bringing unusable plots back into productive use, evaluate the pilots with input from the site in question's site secretary (and site society if one exists) and then select the most suitable methods for further use on an ongoing basis, in order to reduce the waiting lists.	We carried out several pilot schemes on Bebington Road and Harris Allotments, people on the waiting list were invited to an open day to see plots that were considered unusable. This was a successful scheme with many plots being brought back into use. Also, Shakeshaft and Sumner Road, these were derelict and run-down sites they were brought back into use and are now fully tenanted.

Long term Aims of the Allotment Strategy

Five-year aim	Comments
Encourage the role of the site secretaries, site societies and allotment tenant participation in the care of allotment sites	We hold regular allotment site secretary meetings alongside team leaders, this is to address any concerns and encourage their participation in the care of allotment sites.
Highlight the role that allotments play in developing a more sustainable environment, encouraging biodiversity and conservation	We have created a bimonthly newsletter which has Highlighted the role that allotments play in developing a more sustainable environment, encouraging biodiversity and conservation.
Develop a health agenda for allotments focussing on improving the health of the borough.	This was created as part of the Allotment Strategy.
Support groups to develop areas of potential new allotment provision where appropriate	We have been working alongside allotment groups, actions have been taken for the creation of new allotment sites and we have identified a few locations where more plots could be created.
Implement the allotment site improvement plans in partnership.	This is being implemented on sites in partnership with site secretaries.
Encouraging sites to ensure that the provision of allotments can be continued into the future in a cost effective and financially sustainable manner, for example applying for external funding for site improvements, thereby allowing more improvements to be made.	This is encouraged to all site secretaries and associations, many sites have applied for external funding to pay for site improvements, also some sites have created water saving resources to help reduce the amount we spend on water each year.

Improve directional signing to the main access point of each site.	Most of the allotment sites have had new signage to the main access point.
Review and develop a changing structure that reflects the size of plots and available facilities to ensure a fairer charging system for plots.	Size of plots are being looked at and measured accordingly to make sure people are being charged the right amount, this is still an ongoing process.
Acquire further software modules to further enhance the new system and ensure a much more effective and efficient handling of all allotments data.	Invoicing software has been updated, which has ensured invoicing is processed on time and any issues can be easily addressed.

3.0 TASK AND FINISH SESSION

On 15th September 2020, Members of the Review Panel met remotely to discuss the issues around allotment provision on Wirral and how improvements could be made, with key stakeholders included from Wirral Allotment Society and Wirral Site Secretaries along with senior officers from the Council’s Parks and Countryside Team.

The Chair of the Panel advised attendees that the function of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee did not allow for direct decision making, but that any recommendations agreed as a result of this review would be referred to the Council’s Environment, Climate Change and Transport Committee within the new governance committee system for further consideration.

In advance of the meeting, Members had examined an update report from the Parks and Countryside team regarding allotment provision and a number of proposed ideas for development. A summary of key discussions and Member comments is as follows;

- Members queried whether officers had engaged with registered providers such as Magenta Housing when trying to improve provision and seek additional support in the locality. Officers stated that, although there had not been much enthusiasm from those providers following previous contact, there was an opportunity to reach out to them again.
- The Panel questioned how much collaboration there had been so far with planning officers relating to allocation of land in the Borough for allotments under the Local Plan. The response was the Local Plan process does indeed set standards as to what provision is needed for allotments and the Parks and Countryside team have provided information to Planning – however, there is a prospect for Members to make suggestions for further cooperation as part of this review.
- Members asked whether there was opportunity to restore allotment plots in locations where they have previously existed (for example, Mayer Park in Bebington) and this was noted as a potential recommendation area.

- In terms of Parks and Countryside staffing levels, Members asked whether departmental staff are still redeployed to assist with the immediate pandemic response. The Senior Manager for Parks and Countryside advised the Panel that there are still ten members of the team working at the Covid-19 hub, however they are expected back on 21st September 2020.
- Members questioned in which area waits for plots were longest, and whether there are noticeable waits in specific areas or if the spread of demand is across Wirral. The response was that there are currently a high number of applicants in the Wallasey area – particularly for the Mosslands Drive and Belvidere Road sites.
- With discussion around vacant plots, Members asked for clarity around the mechanism for the allocation of plots and how they were assigned. Officers confirmed that applicants are allocated an available plot at their preferred site once they reach the top of the list and that the team attempt to undertake constant communication with those on waiting lists to ensure contact details are kept up to date and that willingness to take up a plot is assessed.
- Included in the update report to Members was an Allotments Questionnaire that has been developed and in time will be emailed to all residents on the waiting list who have provided an email address and posted on the Allotment Facebook page (at present, the questionnaire has been received by those on the Ashton Park site waiting list). The questionnaire asks for residents' opinion to gain a realistic view of their aspirations for allotment gardening. Members asked for further detail on why this survey is being carried out and how it will inform improvements. Officers stated that there have been high numbers of applicants since the lockdown period began in March 2020 and it was thought that gaining an understanding of why these residents are applying and their expectations would be beneficial to the improvement process. Provisional survey results will be shared with Members as soon as practicable.
- Members requested detail on the average waiting time for an allotment place in the Borough. According to officers, the longest time any resident has waited was approximately ten years, although this was down to a preference for a smaller and highly sought site. Average waiting times do vary between different sites, with a wait being as short as 3 months at a site such as Bebington Road – however, the average is still likely to be approximately 4 years. In addition, detail was provided around the allocation process. Applicants can initially express an interest in up to two separate sites and are offered a plot once they reach the top of the waiting list, with the Council using Colony software as an efficient and cost-effective way of managing demand.
- Members asked whether the Council could quickly reduce waiting list numbers by extending existing sites. The Senior Manager of Parks and Countryside agreed and

advised that work had already begun on championing the subdivision of larger plots into smaller sizes. Given how difficult it can be to tend an allotment of bigger proportions, for many plot holders (and particularly families or those in full time employment) this is likely to be welcomed. In addition, subdivision of an existing plot is a realistic and effective approach and these kinds of actions would be welcomed as 'quick wins' in addressing the current issue of long waiting times.

- The Panel asked the estimated cost of creating allotment plots, and whether community schemes can be utilised to assist with this expenditure. Although local groups in some areas do often help to bring plots into use, the approximate cost is £50,000 for each developed site of around 30 plots.

- In response to Member questioning about action to extend plots, and how many would be created, officers provided further information. At the Cross Lane site in Wallasey, a capital bid has been submitted to extend the site to allow for approximately 20 further plots, with a similar proposal also in place for the Mosslands Drive site. At the Bebington Road site, there will be a capital bid to place and additional 36 raised beds (20m x 1m) and to improve the site infrastructure to improve disabled access and provide a creche for family use. The Love Lane, Dawson and Green Lane sites are being assessed by the Local Team Leader to identify opportunity for extension.

3.1 Stakeholder Comment

Professor Ronald Jones, the acting Chair of Wirral Site Secretaries, addressed members on his thoughts on local issues with capacity and demand. At Professor Jones' local site - Fairview in Oxton - there is currently a waiting list of approximately 100 people for 25 plots and recent attempts to recruit to a plot at the site proved difficult as there were apparent issues with those on the waiting list having out of date contact details or, once contacted, advising that they were no longer interested in renting a plot. Professor Jones agreed with the Panel that increased autonomy at individual sites would be beneficial, particularly in allowing secretaries to be more robust in issuing notices to quit, advising that anything that expedited the process of issuing notices (such as emailing photos of unkempt plots) should be encouraged. However, he did advise caution in the procedural framework around this and recommended that clear terms of reference would be useful in ensuring that secretaries knew their role in managing the site. In addition, Professor Jones states that he wished to see improved communication between site secretaries and the Council, and that arrangements for meetings historically had often been infrequent and informal.

Mr Dave Morris, Chair of Wirral Allotment Society, provided a verbal statement for members on his view as a representative of Wirral's allotment users. Mr Morris stated that there has been a disappointing breakdown in communication and action from the

Council regarding allotment improvements. On a number of occasions, he stated that assurances were made to convene a working group to look at taking action and he has yet to be involved in such a group, with little other engagement taking place.

Mr Morris addressed the panel in relation to the statutory requirements of the Council in terms of allotment provision, stating that locally we do not meet the National Allotment Society standard of providing 20 plots per 1000 households and estimating that, as an authority, Wirral is approximately 1000 plots short of achieving this.

Mr Morris suggested the following actions to improve the current process;

- Tightening and improvement of the current system relating to non-compliant plot holders.
- Speeding up the system for new tenant allocation.
- Auditing the waiting list more regularly to ensure applicants still hold an interest.
- Identifying Council sites to expand.
- Developing more links with the Council's health agenda to reduce health inequalities across the Borough.
- Further autonomy for allotment site secretaries, with a trial of self-management to be encouraged.

Whilst much of the discussion with stakeholders centred around the potential opportunity of providing delegated functions to site secretaries, there was agreement by the Panel that this must allow for the retention of a fair allocation system, as well as ensuring that 'common sense' reasoning applied to the issue of notices to quit; particularly where a plot holder has been directly affected by Covid-19, has had personal health problems or has experienced another mitigating circumstance causing short-term impact on their ability to maintain a plot. One potential response to these kinds of individual issues included the possible use of ward member budgets to fund a raised bed, meaning that a plot holder with health problems could remain a social member without the onerous workload of maintaining a plot.

Both Professor Jones and Mr Morris also agreed with the Panel on the sub-division of large plots where possible to provide an immediate boost in plot vacancies and to appeal to those applicants who may prefer a smaller gardening space.

4.0 SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

As a result of the Member review session, a number of crucial findings were gathered. In discussing the future provision for allotments in Wirral, there was agreement that the following key areas required improvement or consideration;

- i) Improved communication with site secretaries and allotment users. Although the Parks and Countryside team have developed a bi-monthly newsletter for plot holders and those on the waiting list, there should be assurance that

- stakeholders will be invited to attend regular, formal meetings with Council officers and local Councillors where possible.
- ii) Increased autonomy for site secretaries in regard to management of allotment sites, and particularly relating to powers to serve notices to quit in order to speed up potentially bureaucratic processes – whilst still ensuring that there is a fair and just allocation and appeals process is in place.
 - iii) Unused Council-owned land and/or land previously utilised for allotment plots should be identified and brought back into use where possible.
 - iv) Sub-division of full plots to provide immediate capacity. It is likely that these smaller plots will be preferential for many potential plot holders who might find difficulty in maintaining a full plot.
 - v) Continued and improved collaboration with planning officers to ensure that allotment provision is built into the Local Plan, and that any Section 106 agreement suitable for allotment site expansion is developed.
 - vi) Additional work undertaken to identify and set a clear target for additional plots needed to meet demand so that the Council might accurately track progress towards achieving this. National Allotment Society standards of 20 plots per 1000 households could act as a starting point to benchmark progression against.

4.1 Recommendations

Recommendation 1; Establish a cross-party and cross-committee working group, in consultation with internal and external stakeholders including Wirral Allotment Society and Wirral Site Secretaries group.

In order to prioritise the increased provision of allotment plots and inform the updated Wirral Allotment Partnership Strategy, a working group should be created with membership comprised of Members of the Council from across policy and service committees, departmental officers, external stakeholders and local partners.

Recommendation 2; That the Wirral Site Secretary Agreement 2015 be amended to allow for increased autonomy and delegated decision-making relating to site management.

The existing Site Secretary Agreement, and if necessary individual Allotment Site Action Plans, should be revised as soon as practicable to provide enhanced authority for site secretaries; specifically relating to the issue of Plot Improvement Notices to expedite the Termination of Agreement process as much as possible so that the plot can be re-let quickly.

Recommendation 3; Recategorise rental fees for new and existing plots.

Research and consultation should be undertaken to look at current rental fees and, where reasonable, potential increases to non-concessionary rents for new plots with improved facilities and according to plot size - with the agreement that any additional income raised from rent payments be reinvested into increased allotment provision across the Borough.

Recommendation 4; Increase existing provision of accessible plots across Wirral by 2025.

Explore all opportunities to improve infrastructure and create raised beds to make allotment gardening more accessible for those with disabilities or mobility problems, including engagement with organisations such as Wirral Evolutions to seek out vacant space and further utilisation of existing sites to increase the number of accessible plots.

Recommendation 5; Increase allotment provision across the Borough by 1000 plots by 2025.

This recommendation should be achieved by;

Improved engagement with Planning Officers to ensure that Wirral's Local Plan protects existing allotment sites and actively encourages developers to provide opportunities for allotments and community food growing spaces within all major new developments.

Any Council-owned land and that managed by registered providers and local partners appropriate for allotment gardening, is identified and brought into use.

Section 106 agreements identified as suitable for allotment site creation or expansion are recognised and acted on.

In addition the Panel endorses the current review of allotment plot sizes and encourages the creation of half plots and raised beds where possible, as well as championing the continued pursuit of capital investment opportunities to support increased allotment provision.