



ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

Monday, 15 November 2021

REPORT TITLE:	WIRRAL ALLOTMENT PARTNERSHIP STRATEGY 2021-26
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR OF NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

REPORT SUMMARY

Committee commissioned a review of allotment provision across Wirral as a part of the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committees work programme in 2019/20. The findings and recommendations from the Scrutiny Review were the subject of a report to Committee on October 2020.

This report sets out the proposed Wirral Allotment Partnership Strategy (2021-26), provided as Appendix 1 to this report, which seeks to address the recommendations set out within the Scrutiny Review. The overall aim and purpose of the Wirral Allotment Partnership Strategy is to set out how allotments are to be maintained within the borough and where appropriate improve the quality, management, and promotion of Wirral Council's Allotment sites.

This Wirral Allotment Partnership Strategy reviews Wirral Council's Allotment provision with the overall intention of providing allotments throughout the borough, in the most cost-effective manner.

The Wirral Plan 2021-2026 sets out an ambition for all our residents to have a good quality of life and to ensure that levels of inequality are reduced.

The proposals within this report affect all wards.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee is recommended to approve the Wirral Allotment Partnership Strategy 2021-26 .

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATION

- 1.1 The Wirral Allotments Partnership Strategy 2021-2026, Appendix 1, seeks to address and set out the Council's plans to reduce the waiting list and improve the allotment experience. These may be summarised under the following four main areas:
- Optimising current use of allotment sites;
 - Expanding appropriate allotment sites across the borough to provide more plots;
 - Developing communication with both allotment holders and those interested in renting a plot; and
 - Finding additional sources of funding where available.
- 1.2 Wirral's Allotments Partnership Strategy supports Wirral Councils Climate Emergency agenda through encouraging more food to be grown locally and promoting pollinators. The strategy will seek to address the issues arising where allotments may have become overgrown or run down and therefore struggle to keep tenants or attract new ones. This builds upon examples where once 'derelict' allotments such as Shakeshaft and Sumner Road Allotments have been turned around and are now fully tenanted. The strategy also seeks to increase the number of allotments available by creating additional sites across the borough but particularly in the Birkenhead area.
- 1.3 As part of the process of developing this revised and updated allotments strategy, it is important to recognise the council's overall wider community aspirations and overarching policies as well as emphasise any national context that is relevant to allotments. This is important as it adds value to the strategy, ensures national and corporate aims are linked to service delivery plans and ensures that funding is targeted to the relevant areas whilst desired outputs and results are achieved.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 This report provides a response and strategy to address the issues considered by a Task & Finish Scrutiny Review on the Allotment Provision on Wirral commissioned by the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee as a part of its annual work programme. It is open to this Committee to require amendments to the proposed strategy.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 As part of the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee's annual work programme, a Task and Finish Scrutiny Review on the Allotment Provision on Wirral was established. The Review Panel was chaired by Councillor Tom Anderson. The Review Panel identified a number of issues relating to the current provision of Council allotments across the Borough, including the number of available plots, waiting lists and areas of particular pressure.
- 3.2 The key objectives set out at the start of the review were:

- to fully understand existing capacity within allotment provision across the Borough, and how it can be maximised and/or expanded at current sites to provide improved access for all Wirral residents;
- to engage with allotment users and representatives of current allotment societies to recognise issues currently faced and how these might be addressed; and
- to contribute to a series of recommendations to ensure the effective management and provision of allotment sites across Wirral.

The outcome of this review has informed the development of the Wirral Allotments Partnership Strategy 2021-2026.

- 3.3 There have been a number of studies undertaken which identify the clear benefits of maintaining an allotment for individuals. Such sites have a positive 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. The health and wellbeing benefits of gardening within an allotment setting are well documented from improving activity levels through strength and cardiovascular activity, to allotment owners eating more home grown fruit and vegetables as well as the positive mental health benefits of being part of a likeminded community. Allotments provide safe and quality outdoor spaces for our residents to be active. The provision of allotments also promotes caring for the environment in which we live, protecting biodiversity and encouraging an increase in natural havens, ensuring its sustainability for the future.
- 3.4 The Allotment Management Policy Statement, contained within the Wirral Allotments Partnership Strategy, sets out Wirral Council's commitment to providing allotments which help achieve the following important aims:
- Enhance people's health and wellbeing;
 - Contribute to nature conservation and the sustainability of the environment;
 - Help increase people's pride in the places where they live; and
 - Achieve objectives in a cost-effective manner
- 3.5 Good health and wellbeing is key to these aims, including promoting active lifestyles, working with partners to improve positive mental health, and supporting more people with disabilities to live independent lives. This strategy is aligned to the emerging Sport and Physical Activity Strategy and its ambition to support our residents to make sport and physical activity part of everyone's everyday life. Developing the allotment offer in the borough is very much aligned to the Active People and Active Places and Open Spaces strand in the new strategy.
- 3.6 COVID-19 has highlighted a trend in growing your own food. At the start of the national 'Lockdown' empty shelves in supermarkets caused many people to recognise the UK's reliance on importing food. A report by the Institute for Sustainable Food at the University of Sheffield ("Grow your own food security? The hidden potential of urban horticulture") shows more people are starting or wanting to start to grow their own food. This is partly due to people spending more time at home, but the evidence also suggests this is a response to an increased awareness of the UK's reliance on the global food system. Urban horticulture will become an integral part of the recovery phase

- 3.7 This trend has been echoed across Wirral, with a significant increase in the level of interest in Wirral residents growing food produce sustainably and locally. Wirral has seen a greater interest in allotment gardening since the COVID-19 pandemic began, with 813 applications for an allotment plot being made between March 2020 and July 2020 during lockdown. Through the Environment and Climate Emergency Policy, the Council also wishes to support local food growth and production through the development of food growing skills for local people. To this end the Council is supporting a pilot scheme with a local organisation 'Earth Moves' to cultivate a section of Council owned land in Leasowe to grow food sustainably and invite local people to become involved and acquire food growing and cultivation skills. If successful, the pilot scheme in Leasowe will be rolled out in other parts of Wirral. The emphasis is on supporting people to gain the confidence and skills to grow their own food and on developing local sustainable food production.
- 3.8 The global COVID-19 pandemic has given the allotment team new challenges to face as they progress through the plans and improvement works to the allotment service. After the first national 'Lockdown' was announced in March 2020, the Allotment Services waived any allotment 'non-cultivation' inspections and notices for three months to protect the vulnerable people in our communities – ensuring those asked to self-isolate did not feel pressured to attend their allotment plot. It also took into consideration those working in the NHS or care sectors who may have less time during the pandemic to tend to their plot. Members of the public were still allowed to tend to their plots if they followed government guidance on social distancing. Inspections started up again in August 2020 with the relevant risk assessments in place

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Any future projects for allotments, in line with the Strategy, will be dependent upon Capital Bids. The Council has reviewed how Capital Bids are applied for and the capital sum will need to be repaid out of the revenue budget specific to the area of the Capital Bid, which could create additional pressures and challenges on budgets

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The Council has a statutory responsibility under Section 23(1) of the Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908 to provide a "sufficient number of allotments and shall let such allotments to persons resident in the borough, district or parish and desiring to take the same."
- 5.2 Wirral Council seeks to manage the borough's allotments and if possible, to increase the number of useable allotments where required. The Wirral Allotments Partnership Strategy 2021-2026 will also consider any additional or updated legislation, guidance, and strategies during the life of the strategy.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 An increase in number or size of some allotment sites, will be the subject to capital bids. Although Section 106 agreements and grant funding will also be sought.

- 6.2 An increase in the number of allotment sites may also require increased administration, although the intention is to build upon the current IT solutions in place in order mitigate this.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 If insufficient increase in allotment provision is made, there may be an increase in complaints from customers on waiting lists.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 The Wirral Allotments Partnership Strategy has been created through the Scrutiny Review commissioned by the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee as a part of its work programme in 2019/20. The findings and recommendations from the Scrutiny Review were the subject of a report to Committee on October 2020.
- 8.2 In addition a working group with representatives of allotments site secretaries, allotments societies and allotment plot holders have also been involved and contributed to the development of the Wirral Allotment Partnership Strategy.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 The Wirral Allotments Partnership Strategy 2021-2026 seeks to address any negative equality implications. An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken, as a part of the development of the strategy, to identify both positive and negative implications which arise.
- 9.2 The Equality Impact Assessment is available via this link:
<https://www.wirral.gov.uk/communities-and-neighbourhoods/equality-impact-assessments>

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 Allotments provide an important opportunity for local cultivation of food and associated learning and can thus play a useful role in our local response to the climate emergency. Through the Cool 2 strategy residents will be encouraged to grow their own food and the Council will facilitate this through the provision of allotment sites and access to advice and support.
- 10.2 Changing to a lower energy intensity diet e.g. consumption of local and seasonal food, is recognised as a way to limit our climate impacts as set out in the new climate strategy for Wirral, Cool 2
<https://wirralenvironmentalnetwork.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2020/01/Cool2WirralClimateStrategyByCoolWirralPartnershipPDF.pdf>
- 10.3 Allotments provide an important opportunity for composting. Compost not only helps the allotments to grow and flourish, but it also contributes to a cleaner environment. It reduces the need for bonfires, cuts down on waste going to landfill and requires less manufactured and packaged products.

- 10.4 Wirral Council actively promotes composting and offer free “Get Composting!” workshops to beginners as well as a range of subsidised compost bins and food caddies. Visit www.wirral.gov.uk/composting for more information.
- 10.5 Allotments enable plots to house bees, Beekeeping will not only lead to healthy and vibrant plants but ensure that bees continue to play their critical role in our ecosystem, Bee keeping can be a very positive activity, helping with pollination and providing honey. All plot holders are encouraged to grow suitable plants to support pollinators and exercise restraint in the use of pesticides.
- 10.6 Pollinators like bees play a key role in one out of every three bites of food we eat. Without them, many plants we rely on for food would die off, Bees are responsible for the production of many seeds, nuts, berries, and fruit, which serve as a vital food source for wild animals.
- 10.7 Bees play a part in every aspect of the ecosystem, they support the growth of trees, flowers, and other plants, which serve as food and shelters for creatures large and small, Bees contribute to complex, interconnected ecosystems that allow a diverse number of different species to co-exist. Wirral Council was recognised last year for its work in this area with a Bees’ Needs Champions Awards for the Meadow Restoration Project at Wirral Country Park.
- 10.8 Increasing the provision of allotments, bee keeping, and composting is recognized to contribute to a cleaner environment.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 Wirral is facing stark economic, social and health inequalities. The Wirral Plan is committed to addressing this. With Community Wealth Building at its heart, the Wirral Plan sets out how to tackle this and makes a major contribution to improving the economic, social and health outcomes of the borough.
- 11.2. It is well documented that involvement with, and the provision of high-quality Allotments has a positive effect on individuals and communities. We will create opportunities to develop partnerships with the NHS, Wirral Public Health and appropriate charitable organisations such as Wirral Mind and Wirral Food Bank to develop a health agenda for allotments focussing on improving the health and wellbeing of the borough

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APPENDICES

- Appendix 1 – Wirral Allotments Partnership Strategy 2021-26
- Appendix 2 - Useful Information for Wirral Allotment Plot Holders
- Appendix 3 - A Guide to the Allotments Processes: How it All Works
- Appendix 4 - The Tenancy Agreement
- Appendix 5 - The Site Secretaries Agreement

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Wirral Council Allotments Partnership Strategy & Improvement Plan 2015-2020
- Wirral Council Site Secretary Agreement 2015
- The King’s Fund ‘Gardens and Health; Implications for policy and practice’ publication 2016
- Allotment Provision Scrutiny Review Report
- Allotment Provision Scrutiny Review Scoping Document
- State of the Market Survey 2020 : Local Authority Allotment Services
- Wirral Council - Sports & Physical Activity Strategy briefing to the Tourism, Communities, Culture & Leisure Committee, 23 November 2020.
- Wirral Council - Environment and Climate Emergency Policy (2021)
- Allotments Acts 1908, 1925 and 1950
- A Place to Grow (2010)
- Growing in the Community, 2nd Edition, 2009
- Wirral Council Plan 2021-2026

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee Allotment Provision Scrutiny Review	22 October 2020
Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee Allotment Provision in the Borough	30 January 2020