



ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY, 30 NOVEMBER 2022

REPORT TITLE:	Update - Wirral Allotment Partnership Strategy
REPORT OF:	Director of Neighbourhood Services

REPORT SUMMARY

The Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport 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 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.

Following on from the initial Wirral Allotment Partnership Strategy, agreed at Committee in January 2022, this report provides an update on progress against recommendations.

The Wirral Allotment Partnership Strategy seeks to deliver on the following priorities from the Wirral Plan 2021-26:

- Safe and Pleasant Communities,
- A Sustainable Environment,
- An Inclusive Economy,
- Active and Healthy Lives

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee is recommended to note the update report and the progress made.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATION

1.1 In 2019/20, Members 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. 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 informed the development of the Wirral Allotments Partnership Strategy.

1.2 The Wirral Allotment Partnership Strategy was agreed by the Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee in January 2022. The Committee asked, at that time, that regular updates be provided as to the progress of delivering the Strategy.

This report provides an update on: -

- Number of prospective tenants on waiting list.
- Update on Capital Programme:-
 - New site under development
 - Raised beds
- Allotment Working Group.
- Wirral Allotment Discount Scheme.
- A site identified for further Allotment development.
- Unlettable Plots.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

2.1 This report provides an update on the progress of the strategy in addressing 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. As such no other options have been considered.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

3.1 In the January 2022 Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee, a request was made for regular updates on key issues around Allotment Strategy targets. The following information sets out the points of ongoing work and progression and challenges.

3.2 **Number of prospective tenants on waiting list:** as of 1st November 2022, there are 1581 people on the waiting list. It should be noted that 90% of applications to the waiting lists express an interest in two different sites. Applicants are then given the option of taking a plot on the first available site where a plot becomes available.

Waiting List Numbers					
	2018	2019	2020	2021	01/11/2022
Total Individuals on the waiting list	800	900	1000	1500	1581

- 3.3 **Capital Programme: site under development:** This has been a challenging process with the extension to the Mosslands site, in Wallasey, requiring planning permission to be sought and granted. While planning permission has now been granted, the process took 18 months to complete; some of this delay compounded by the impact of Covid. Furthermore, Covid has impacted upon the tendering process including costs such as the increased price of materials. Procurement processes and staffing resources have also impacted on the process. Moving this forward has also included consultation with the allotment community. Work on the extension to the Mosslands Allotment site has now begun. The work will include a number of elements including fencing, road lay-out, residential property boundaries and drainage work. The boundary issues on the residential side of the extension, as one of the requirements of planning permission, includes engagement with the property owners and this is currently underway. This will bring in approximately twenty new allotment plots at the site. A final decision is to be made on the option of having a number of half plots to increase availability and access to allotments. It is anticipated that these new allotments will be available for late March 2023.
- 3.4 **Capital Programme: raised beds:** The raised beds at Bebington Road Allotment site have been renovated and brought back into Council management. This has been positively received with 28 let with only 5 remaining raised beds remaining to be let. The intention is that as plots become available across other allotment sites, the option to consider conversion to raised beds will be made, taking into account their location within the allotment site.
- 3.5 **Allotment Working Group:** This group has been established to improve communication between the Council and the Allotment Community. Membership is made up of Site Secretaries, Officers of the Council and appropriate other representatives, such as the North West Allotment Forum. The Working Group was established in June 2021 and the first items of business were reviews of both the Site Secretaries Agreement and the Tenancy Agreement. A Terms of Reference has been established, provided as an appendix to this report. The initial focus areas for the group was consulting with the Allotment Site Secretaries around the potential proposal for Site Secretaries to hold a greater autonomy in the day to day management of allotments. The majority of Site Secretaries did not want to have more autonomy in their role. Site Secretaries were keen to see improved processes in both the vacating of plots by previous tenants and the issuing of plots to new tenants. As a result new Allotment Site Secretaries Agreement and Tenancy Agreement documents have been updated and will shortly be ready for issue, subject to final sign-off by Legal. The Working Group has also considered the Wirral Allotment Discount Scheme, details of which are provided in the following section of this report. The next area of focus for the group will be to review the 'How It All Works' document, which is presently being consulted upon with the Working Group. The 'How It All Works' document is key in setting out arrangements to improve the process for inspections and the role these play in removing tenants who have not been able to maintain their plots to the appropriate standard. The Allotment Working Group initially met on a quarterly basis, to enable members to consider and take feedback from other tenants. Since May 2022, it was agreed that the Working Group would meet monthly following on from the consultation undertaken. Other topics of discussion with the Allotment Working Group has included Water Usage, Fires on

Allotments, Unlettable Plots, and the Allotments Annual Competition.

3.6 Wirral Allotment Discount Scheme: Members of the Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee commented upon the current Allotment Discount Scheme, when the Wirral Allotment Partnership Strategy was presented to Committee in January 2022. In particular that the Discount Scheme provided a 50% discount to those who were over the age of 60 rather than on a person's ability to pay for an allotment plot. It was noted that the current age threshold of 60 for a discount did not appear to reflect the current State Pension Age. The Discount Scheme therefore formed an area for consideration for the Allotment Working Group; it was noted by the group that any amendments would need to be cost neutral. Initial discussions focused on amending the Discount Scheme so that the current discount rate of 50% would apply to those claiming benefits or in receipt of a State Pension (e.g.: being over the age of 66 currently). Under this proposal approximately 150 allotment holders would cease to receive a discount, as they were aged between 60 and 65 years of age. The Allotment Working Group felt that they could not support this change due to the number of existing plot holders that would cease to be eligible for a discount. An alternative compromise proposal was put forward that the Discount Scheme would include allotment holders who were over 60 and those claiming benefits, however in order for the Discount Scheme to remain cost neutral, that the Discount be reduced for all from 50% to 45%. At the October 2022 Working Group meeting, this was felt to be a workable compromise and members of the working group asked that this be put to the next Allotment Site Secretaries meeting for comment. At the time of writing this report we are awaiting feedback on this proposal from Site Secretaries.

3.7 Sites Identified for Further Development: the following sites have been identified as sites for development to increase the number of available plots.

- Dawson Road Allotments: extension to the site; planning permission will be required and work on this starting shortly. It is estimated that will provide an additional 32 plots
- Central Park – this will be an extension to the present Love Lane Allotments site. The proposed section of the park was previously part of the Love Lane site but twenty years ago was taken out of use due to low demand at the time for allotment plots. This will require planning permission. It is estimated that this will provide an additional 28 plots

A review of all sites continues to be undertaken to identify further potential sites.

3.8 Unlettable Plots: So far this year, 16 unlettable plots have been brought back into use across Wirral from a total of 63 plots. This leaves a further 47 unlettable plots which we plan to clear and bring into use by the end of March 2023. The 63 unlettable plots have included some plots which, whilst technically not on the unlettable list, have seen frequent changes of tenant. Following assessment, the condition of these particular plots was deemed to be acting as a barrier for maintaining a regular tenant.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Capital bids for increasing allotment provision are likely to be required.

4.2 If there is significant increase in allotment infrastructure and/or increase in new allotment sites, then the present revenue budget will come under greater pressure.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Where the Council believes that there is a demand for allotments it has a statutory duty under the Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908, Section 23(1), 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 The Council is required to consider allotment provision as part of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). In consideration of the NPPF requirement to ‘promote healthy and safe communities’ planning policies and decisions should aim to achieve healthy, inclusive and safe places which “enable and support healthy lifestyles, especially where this would address identified local health and well-being needs”, for example through the provision of safe and accessible green infrastructure, access to healthier food, and allotments.
- 5.3 If the Council identifies a need for allotments (for example, as part of an open spaces and recreation needs study informing the local plan) then they can either identify land for use as allotments in the local plan or require developers to provide allotments on suitable sites through section 106 agreements as part of the open space requirements through the local plan policy.
- 5.4 Alternatively, if the council has land available in its ownership that could be used for allotments, it can make them into allotments without further reference to the local plan having followed all due process.
- 5.5 Wirral Council seeks to manage the borough’s allotments and if possible, to increase the number of useable allotments where required, in accordance with the following legislation, guidance and strategies:
- Allotments Acts 1908, 1925 and 1950.
 - National Planning Policy Framework.
 - A Place to Grow (2010) and Growing in the Community, 2nd Edition, 2009.
 - Wirral Council Plan.

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 and a risk of legal challenge if there is a breach of the Council’s statutory duty.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 The Wirral Allotments Partnership Strategy has been created with significant input from Elected Members, 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 and delivery of the Wirral Allotment Partnership Strategy.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

9.1 The Wirral Allotments Partnership Strategy 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.

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 There have been a number of studies undertaken around the benefits of maintaining an allotment for individuals and communities, 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

11.3 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
- Achieve objectives in a cost-effective manner

This commitment is reinforced within Wirral's Council Plan which sets out an ambition for all our residents to have a good quality of life and ensure levels of inequality are reduced.

REPORT AUTHORS:

Anthony Bestwick

Assistant Senior Manager

Email: anthonybestwick@wirral.gov.uk

APPENDICES

Terms of Reference Allotment Working Group

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Wirral Council Allotments Partnership Strategy

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: 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)

TERMS OF REFERENCE

This report is being considered by the Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee in accordance with Sections A and E of its Terms of Reference;

(a) in co-ordinating the response to cross-cutting sustainability issues such as reducing carbon emissions, air quality issues, climate change response, improving resource efficiency and developing sustainable energy;

(e) in respect of parks, open spaces, countryside management, allotments, playgrounds and cemeteries, including arboricultural, gardening and warden services.

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee Wirral Allotment Partnership Strategy	20 January 2022
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