

PART A

Report to: Cabinet
Date of meeting: 18th June 2012
Report of: Head of Community Services
Title: Allotments Framework and Strategy Update

1.0 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report summarises the progress to date on updating the 2002 Allotment Strategy and the ongoing development of a new 5 year strategy. During 2011, a major consultation and review was carried out of the Allotment service and provision of allotments generally in the town. As a result of this review and feedback received from over 40% of tenants, a new Strategy and Framework and Action Plan is being developed for the period 2012 to 2017. This will include a summary of the consultation, as well as a detailed Action Plan for 2012-2017.
- 1.2 The Allotments Strategy with Framework and Action Plan will be a comprehensive review of Watford Borough Council's allotment provision with the intention of providing a well-managed cost effective service offering good quality allotments throughout the Borough, in the most cost effective manner over the next 5 years, whilst also taking note of factors which could impact on allotments during and beyond this period.
- 1.3 Progress on developing the strategy has been excellent with feedback from tenants and allotment representatives after consultation in late 2011 and early 2012. A number of key themes and a proposed Action Plan have therefore been developed:-

Key Theme 1: To ensure sufficient stock of allotments at the recommended quantity and quality standard and to meet the present and future needs of Watford's community.

Key Theme 2: To ensure the benefits of allotment gardening are promoted to all sections of the Watford community.

Key Theme 3: To ensure allotments in Watford are managed and administered in the most effective and efficient way.

Key Theme 4: To ensure that resources match the needs of the service.

However, there is now an opportunity to re-assess the draft strategy and framework

in light of wider strategic initiatives that may impact on the provision of allotments in Watford. These include the Watford Health Campus Project, HCC Schools expansion programme and the possible outsourcing of Parks & Open Spaces Service to an external provider. Some feedback has also been given by some tenants that the strategy does not highlight the need for further capital investment in allotments. This has meant that the strategy needs to be developed further and therefore this report seeks to update Cabinet of progress to date and recommend the next steps.

2.0 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 To note progress to date and review the draft strategy in Autumn 2012.
- 2.2 That the Mayor establish an Allotment Stakeholder Panel to engage with the options for future investment and help finalise the strategy and action plan.

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Report approved by: Lesley Palumbo, Head of Community Services

3.0 **DETAILED PROPOSAL**

- 3.1 Allotments have been an important and valuable part of our urban and rural communities for over 150 years. They were created to empower those on low incomes to improve their quality of life, health and diet, by growing their own food. The common land these people worked was the remains of land that had once been communal agricultural land.
During the past 10 years gardening has become a very popular leisure activity in the UK, offering a relaxing alternative to the stressful pace of modern day life. Increasingly allotments are being valued for their therapeutic benefits in providing a quiet refuge, where people can have the sense of gardening in the country, within an urban environment.
- 3.2 Watford Borough Council provides 13 allotment sites in the Borough which continue to be popular with local residents echoing the national picture.
- 3.3 In 2002, Watford Borough Council drafted its first Allotment Strategy. At the time, the strategy stated that:-
“The Council believed that the future of allotments was secure and provided multiple benefits, not just to gardeners, but also to the environment and the wider community. The Strategy’s aim was to maximise the numbers of people using allotments by promoting opportunities to all residents. It aimed to protect all allotment sites and ensure the provision of attractive, safe allotment sites with a good standard of service

and infrastructure. Finally, the aim of the strategy was to protect and enhance the wildlife value of allotment sites.”

The previous strategy also highlighted 14 objectives and whilst these were important at the time, they have since been re-assessed and, where relevant, incorporated into a proposed revised Action Plan for an updated strategy. The previous strategy has been reviewed and it was considered that it needed to be fully revised and updated due to changes nationally as well as locally, as well as taking into consideration the ongoing changes within the current economic climate affecting both the Council as well as allotment tenants. At the same time, the strategy needs to take account of the following:-

- Watford Health Campus Development and potential impact on the Farm Terrace site and redundant allotments at Willow Lane – see the report on the Watford Health Campus programme update on this Cabinet Agenda;
- HCC Schools expansion and their request to expand Orchard School onto existing vacant allotment land adjacent to Callowland Allotments; and
- Outsourcing options for Parks & Open Spaces and whether the allotment service will be included in an outsourced service provision or retained in house.

3.4 The initial updated strategy has been developed and was underpinned by a Framework and Action Plan. It currently highlights the following:-

- Facts and Figures – the current position in Watford
- What allotment tenants told us
- What else do we know about our allotments
- What else can we do to improve the service
- Legal stuff – the do’s and don’ts of allotments
- Where does the money come from
- What are we going to do in the next 5 years
- How will we know how we are doing

3.5 In particular, the consultation revealed what tenants actually thought about the current service:-

- “the quality of current allotment sites ranges but overall 92% of allotment tenants rate their site as adequate to excellent and only 8% as poor to very poor”.
- “86% of tenants think that allotment rents are reasonable (despite recent increases in 2011)”;
- “Uncultivated plots left by existing tenants, the length of time to let uncultivated plots and waiting lists were the biggest issues”.

A number of meetings have also been held with representatives from sites including local allotments societies and site supervisors. Borough-wide consultation on the initial draft Strategy and Framework and Action Plan was also carried out with substantive feedback received and comments taken on board where appropriate. Further consultation however has also revealed that tenants would like to see the strategy highlight a more focussed investment on allotments across the town to complement work done to date at Cherry Tree and Wiggenhall.

3.6 Occupancy rates are now at their highest and waiting lists have been considerably reduced. In the past few years, there has been a significant improvement in the

service, which is reflected in the growing occupancy rates (66% in 2002, 89% in 2006 and 91% in 2011) and a satisfaction level of 73%, which has risen to 92% in 2011.

- 3.7 A number of issues still remain within the service. Some sites still have waiting lists but these are now much reduced and there are still concerns from some tenants in relation to the new levels of maintenance which have been classed as “standard” and “enhanced”. Only one site (Wiggenhall) is currently under “enhanced” status and has received considerable capital investment. The remaining sites voted to remain on “standard” status. Cherry Tree is now also under self management status and is doing very well after significant investment. Callowland have also recently approached the Council asking for assistance in looking at Self Management options. One of the aims is to encourage other sites to consider self management and the benefits this brings.
- 3.8 The Framework and Action Plan should clearly outline what we are hoping to do over the next 5 years. Clearly this requires funding and investment. Some S106 funding is currently being allocated and officers will work with site supervisors to assess what each site requires within the parameters of “standard” and “enhanced” status.
- 3.9 The Action Plan and potential investment from the Watford Health Campus project; the potential relocation of Farm Terrace site and issues surrounding Orchard Primary School do offer opportunities for investment in allotments across the Borough and need to be considered further in a more detailed Action Plan. Allowing for these issues to be clarified, a revised Strategy will be finalised for Autumn 2012 following further dialogue with key stakeholders. It is proposed that the Mayor establish an Allotment Stakeholder Panel which would comprise local allotment holder representation as well as other relevant stakeholders and representation from the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners to engage on the options for future investment and help finalise the strategy and action plan.

4.0 **IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 **Financial**

- 4.1.1 The Head of Strategic Finance comments that the Council’s current capital programme very largely uses up all existing capital receipts (both General Fund and Section 106 receipts). It is essential therefore that the Allotment Strategy recognises that it should identify key sites and relinquish those of marginal benefit in order to generate capital receipts that can be earmarked for a necessary enhancement programme..

4.2 **Legal Issues** (Monitoring Officer)

- 4.2.1 The Head of Legal and Property Services comments that there are no legal implications in this report.

4.3 **Equalities**

- 4.3.1 The Framework and Action Plan sets out a clear direction of travel based on considerable consultation carried out by Parks and Open Spaces. The survey showed that a typical allotment tenant may be male (57%) or female (43%), but 95% are white British. 16% have a disability of some kind. The age range is now very diverse with

34% aged between 35 and 54 years old and 34% older than 65 years. The draft strategy was also well received at the One Watford Equalities Panel.

One of the Action Plans states - "To develop partnerships with organisations such as health commissioners, community groups, local schools, Herts County Council, Schools, Watford Community Housing Trust, Black and Minority Ethnic and Youth Groups to broaden the appeal of allotment gardening."

An equality impact analysis will be developed alongside the revised strategy. The feedback already received will be used to support the analysis in terms of identifying positive and negative impacts and the actions that might be taken to address them. This will include building understanding of under representation of certain groups, in particular understanding the reasons for the under representation of people from Black and Minority Ethnic communities using allotments.

Appendices

None

Background Papers

None

File Reference

None