

Crawley Borough Council

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Commission 5 October 2015

Allotments and Delivery of Service Provision Update Report

Report of the Head of Community Services – Report Number HCS/01

1. Purpose

- 1.1 On 1 December 2014, the Overview and Scrutiny Commission asked officers to provide a progress report, following the systems thinking review and taking into account the recommendations proposed at the Commission's meeting.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 To the Overview and Scrutiny Commission

That the Commission notes the report and current service improvements.

3. Reasons for the Recommendations

- 3.1 The recommendations responded to the findings from public consultation as well as the systems thinking review which examined the current service provision and explored the possibility of providing the service in new ways.

4. Background

- 4.1 A Scrutiny Panel was established in 2008 to review the implementation and effectiveness of the allotment service and to develop proposals for an improved service. There have been many changes in service provision since 2008, most notably the Facilities Systems Thinking Review which commenced in April 2013. The allotments service was included in this review in spring 2014.
- 4.2 A report was provided to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission under the Scrutiny Procedure Rules in December 2014 and it was agreed that the Commission receive a further update following the systems thinking review in 2015.

5. Description of Issue to be resolved

- 5.1 As part of the Systems Thinking Review an audit of each allotment site was conducted, together with a consultation exercise to seek feedback from allotment holders. A clear message obtained from allotment holders was that, although there were common themes, each site was different and in order to meet the individual needs of each site it was important to recognise this individualism when looking at how best to address the key priorities and not to take a "one size fits all" approach.

5.2 As a result of the feedback obtained from allotment holders, key issues have been established and an initial 6 month improvement plan produced to address those priority issues common to most of the allotment sites. The initial improvement plan details the actions to be taken on the key issues (appendix1), these being:

- Dealing with uncultivated plots;
- Re-letting vacant plots quicker;
- Improving site security;
- Improving provision of water.

There has been feedback received from plot holders on the improvement works done to date, a selection of which are included in appendix 2.

5.3 A commitment has been made to undertake consultation with allotment holder representatives towards the end of the initial improvement plan period, the focus of which will be to review progress to date and explore further improvements that plot holders consider necessary.

5.4 Communication was a recurring theme raised by plot holders during the consultation and this was on several levels. The communication between the Council and plot holders, communication between site representatives and plot holders and communication between plot holders themselves. The main focus of communications in relation to site representatives was around how effective they were in the link role between the Council and plot holders. Not all sites have representatives and some plot holders felt that site representatives were not always representative of their views. What did come through strongly is that being an allotment holder is a very individual thing, for some it is about solitude and others the opportunity to socialise.

5.5 The Community Development Team will be working alongside the Facilities Team to explore opportunities to work with plot holders to develop either formal or informal organisations, as is considered appropriate by plot holders at each individual site. The scope of this work will be driven by the interest from plot holders and will run in parallel with the ongoing improvement plans.

5.6 Monthly updates have been introduced to keep plot holders informed of progress. These updates (appendix 3) are being displayed on site notice boards and circulated direct to plot holders via email. Email distribution lists have been created for individual sites as well as a generic circulation list with the intention of further developing information sharing going forward to provide news, updates and “helpful hints”.

6. Supporting Information & Analysis

6.1 The Systems Thinking review has identified the purpose of the Allotments Service as being “to provide me with an allotment that I can maintain, and enjoy growing my own produce”. To fulfil this purpose in a sustainable way requires both flexibility and adaptability in how the service is delivered, and that service objectives are based upon a sound understanding of plot holder’s needs. The inclusion of open work shop sessions, as a part of the consultation process, offered the opportunity to explore, in depth, the views of plot holders and to use this information to plan with confidence the required changes to the service.

- 6.2 Over the 2 workshop sessions a total of 121 allotment holders attended. In addition to the workshops, 125 responses were received to the feedback questionnaires. The excellent response from plot holders has enabled forward planning based upon facts that reflect the opinion of the majority of plot holders who responded.
- 6.3 The total number of plots across the 20 allotment sites currently stands at 725. This is a net increase of 72 plots from the start of the improvements programme and has been achieved by sub dividing existing large plots into smaller units. The purpose of which is to increase availability and provide greater choice of plot size at each site. The number of available plots is likely to grow further as the renewals process gets underway.
- 6.4 The number of vacant plots now available for use stands at 169, although this figure is expected to reduce considerably over the next 2 months with the introduction of the changes in how plots are offered. The main change being a move away from only offering a plot to the top individual on the waiting list to offering as many persons on the waiting list as plots that are vacant. This is being done on a first come first served basis. We will be measuring the end to end times for the letting of vacant plots.
- 6.5 The waiting list for allotments currently stands 491, the actual number of individuals on the waiting list is 359. The variance is down to having a number of individuals registered on various site waiting lists.
- 6.6 With the actual number of individuals on the waiting list standing at 359 and the available plots at 169, the net shortfall of plots is currently 190. This shortfall will reduce further with the introduction of the changes previously detailed. By the end of December 2015 we will have a clear picture of the true demand for the service and whether the current provision meets that demand.

7. Implications

- 7.1 To deliver the change from taps to water troughs across all of the allotment sites will cost £25,000. The intention is to initially install a small number of the troughs as a trial to establish how effective they are at addressing the issues raised by plot holders. These initial trials will be funded from existing revenue budgets.

8. Background Papers

Final Report of the Allotments Scrutiny Panel 25 March 2008 - OSC/78
[Management of the Council's Allotments and Delivery of Service Provision Update Report - DC&PS/009](#)
[Minutes of OSC 1.12.14](#)

Report author and contact officer:
Rob Channon – Interim Head of Community Services (Operations)
rob.channon@crawley.gov.uk direct dial 01293 438653

Appendix 1

Allotments Improvement Plan July to December 2015

Dealing with uncultivated plots

Action	How will this help?
Cut and clear rubbish from all unlet plots and cover using heavy duty permeable membrane and pegs.	By clearing and covering the plots with a membrane the weed growth will be suppressed and not affect other allotment holders. Being permeable the membrane will allow water through but not light so weeds will die off making the plot easier to work.
Introduce into the tenancy agreement the requirement that plot holders cover any area of their plot that is not being worked.	There are a substantial amount of plots that are currently let but not being worked. As with unlet plots, these plots are causing weeds to spread and adding to the general unkempt look of the sites. (Suitable covering material will be available from the Council at cost price).
Change the requirement to cultivate 75% of plot to work 25% of the plot in first year, 50% in the second year, and 75% thereafter with the requirement that any unworked areas must be covered.	Currently there is a very high turnover of new starters that give up within a year. This is resulting in certain plots not being uncultivated year on year. Cultivating 75% of a whole plot that is over grown is a daunting task for a new starter taking on the plot. In moving to the 25%,50% and 75% it is hoped that we will retain more new comers who go on to be long term plot holders. The requirement for keeping any unworked area covered will eliminate the impact of weeds on other plot holders, and if the plot does exchange hands will mean less work for whoever takes the plot on.
Remove from use unlet plots that are not fit for cultivation and return to grass.	There are a number of plots that are not suitable for cultivation and are likely not to be taken on by new comers, or if they are they are likely to be given up quickly. The main issues being proximity of large trees or water logging. These plots will be removed and returned to grass which will be kept cut along with the other grassed areas on site.
Divide some of the large vacant plots into smaller units to increase the number of available plots and provide greater choice.	Not everyone wants a full size plot, by providing a range of plot size at each site will give allotment holders the opportunity to select a plot size that meets their needs.

Re-letting of vacant plots quicker

Action	How will this help?
Move the annual tenancy agreement renewal date to October, undertake the first inspection round in January and introduce a 4 week termination notice period.	The current process requires 3 inspections, 4 weeks apart before a termination for non-cultivation of a plot is issued. The first of these inspections is undertaken in April, by which time plots become weeded and start to impact on other plot holders. The current 3 month process also leaves no preparation time for someone new coming onto the plot. By moving forward the renewal and inspection dates and reducing the notice period to 4 weeks will allow a much faster turnaround, which in turn will enable the plot to be re-let much more quickly than is currently the case.(under the allotments act a plot holder must be given 4 weeks' notice of termination which cannot be issued sooner than 3 months from taking on a plot).
Create more choice of plot size across sites.	By taking some of the larger unlet plots and dividing them into smaller plots new starters will have the opportunity to choose a plot size that meets their needs. The provision of a variety of plot sizes also offers the opportunity for existing plot holders, that are unable to work all of a full size plot the option to "down size" whilst remaining at their current allotment site. This will also increase capacity and allow a greater number of residents to benefit from having an allotment.
Introduction of the requirement to cover any unworked areas of plots.	The introduction of the requirement to cover unworked ground will prevent weed growth and when plots are vacated they will be ready for occupation immediately a termination is confirmed, without the need to first clear the plot and enabling a quicker re-letting of vacant plots.
Contact persons on a waiting list as soon as a plot becomes available.	This will help ensure that plots do not remain vacant when there is a demand for them from new users.
Renumbering of plots.	Over the years there have been numerous changes across the sites which does make identifying plots difficult. This coupled with the fact that very few plots currently display a clear number makes it hard for new comers to find their way around.

Improving Site Security

Action	How will this help?
Extend gate heights to match surrounding fencing and hedges.	On a number of sites we will either replace, or add extensions to existing gates to bring the height up to that of the adjoining fences or hedges.
Increase hedge heights to a minimum of 2 metres.	Some of the perimeter hedges have historically been kept cut to a relatively low height. All perimeter hedges will now be allowed to grow to around 2 meters.
Where possible plant new hedging to provide a greater physical barrier around the perimeter of allotment sites.	At sites, where there is sufficient space to do so and where security is an issue, we will plant new hedging of a “spikey” nature. The new hedging will be planted alongside existing fencing and allowed to grow through to establish a thick hedgerow, whilst taking account of impact upon residents that back onto allotment sites.
Introduce high quality combination locks for access gates.	We will replace existing locks with high quality combination locks. The combinations will be changed each year and the new number communicated to the plot holders once they renew their tenancy agreement.

Improving Provision of Water

Action	How will this help?
Use of troughs instead of taps	Troughs will allow quicker filling of watering cans or buckets and illuminate the waiting time currently experience with taps. The troughs will be self-filling, this will assist allotment holders who have problems operating the taps. The use of troughs should help counter the effect of low water pressure experienced at some sites, again speeding up the process of watering for the allotment holders. We will try troughs at 2 sites to see how effective they are before committing to installing them at all sites.
Extend the availability of the water supply.	Currently the water supply is turned on at the end of March and turned off at the end of October. We will now turn the water supply on at the start of February and off at the end of November. (If there is severely cold weather then this may change).

Appendix 2

Feedback on Improvements works

1. Thanks For sending this through. I met Colin yesterday down at Knepp Close and he seemed like a nice guy and someone who know's what he's talking about.
2. *Hi Rob, I received a call from plot holder who has a plot at Broadfield (Vulcan) and Bewbush (Ellman). He wants to give his thanks to Colin and Robbie for all their hard work and the what they have done on the allotments over the last few days. They are a credit to the team, well presented (appearance) and Please could you pass on the Mayor on his behalf.*
3. Can you pass on that all your proposed changes are really welcome.
(Knepp Close)
4. *Dear All*
Thank you for the attached.
I'm very happy to see there is a plan in place now to deal with un-let and un-cultivated plots.
There is one more thing that is missing from the plan that is rubbish collection. We would like rubbish collection may be once or twice a year. This would be anything that the allotment holders cannot out in their compost bins.
(Knepp)
5. **Wow!**
I can't believe that you are going to do all that in 6 months but I really hope that you do. Again, if there is anything us "old timers" can do to assist (free of charge any time) then all you have to do is ask.
Brilliant news and thanks for the update - really appreciated.
Best regards,
(Vulcan Close)
6. **Thanks.**
Look forward to some more improvements at Gossops Green
7. *Hello Colin, pleased to hear from you, and thank you very much for the work done on our allotment site, it was much appreciated by my fellow allotment holders. We can now see the wood for the trees. I hope that it may encourage some new plot holders, as it really is a very pleasant site.*
Thank you for your response.
Yours

Appendix 3

Dear Allotment Holder

Allotments Update July 2015

We hope all is going well for you on your plot at this busy time of year.

We are pleased to advise you that we have now completed the audit of each allotment site, along with the review of feedback received from allotment holders. A very clear message coming from allotment holders was that, although there are common themes, each site is different and in order to meet the individual needs of each site it is important that we recognise this individualism when looking at how best to address the key priorities and not to take a “one size fits all” approach.

Taking this information on board we have now produced an action plan identifying what will be done between now and December 2015, a copy of which is attached.

The action plan has taken account of what you, as allotment holders, have told us is most important in terms of improving the service. We have prioritised the work to take place over the next 6 months based on what the majority of allotment holders have said mattered most to them.

The key priorities that came from your feedback were:

- Dealing with uncultivated plots;
- Re-letting vacant plots quicker;
- Improving site security;
- Improving provision of water.

Towards the end of the initial 6 month improvement plan we will invite representatives of allotment holders to meet again with us to review what has been achieved and what further improvements might be needed going forward.

For the benefit of allotment holders not on email we will place a copy of the improvement plan and updates in the allotment site notice boards.

Kind Regards

Chris Harris – Head of Community Services
Rob Channon – Community Facilities Manager
Colin Hayler – Allotments Officer

Dear Allotment Holder

Allotments Update August 2015

Things have been going well since our last contact in August and good progress has been made with the improvement plan, a summary of the key points are detailed below.

Cut and covering of unlet plots

The cutting back of vegetation and clearing of rubbish from unlet plots has been the main focus of work during July and August with good progress having been made. The team are currently at the last allotment site to be done, which is Hazelwick Road. The volume of rubbish on some of the plots has been very surprising, the true extent of which was only revealed once the vegetation had been cut back. You will no doubt have noticed the piles of rubbish on your site resulting from this stage of the work, this will be cleared as we move into September. Not everything cleared from the plots is rubbish, there is a lot of useful material which will be set aside as recycled materials for plot holders to reuse. This will be stored in a designated area on your site so please help yourself.

More choice of plot size

After cutting back and covering some of the vacant plots have been divided into smaller size units to provide a variety of plot size at each allotment site. As further plots become available we will review the mix of plot sizes at each site to further develop this choice for both existing and future plot holders to both maximise the access to the facilities and to help make owning a plot a manageable and enjoyable experience.

Grass cutting

The Councils verge cutting team have been undertaking the grass cutting at the allotment sites as they visit each neighbourhood. Dealing with the grass cutting in this way is a trial but initial indications are promising. The team will be around the sites again in September to cut the grass. Just a reminder that the team will cut the main path ways, the paths between plots are down to plot holders to maintain.

Inspections and Tenancy Agreements

The second round of inspections of let plots took place in July and where appropriate plots holders have been notified of the need to improve the condition of their plots. The final inspection round will take place in September, as will the sending out of tenancy renewals under the new conditions. Please take the time to read the new agreement conditions, there are several changes including the requirement for any unworked ground to be covered. Don't forget you can purchase suitable covering material from us at cost price, this being 35p per square metre.

What comes next ?

Starting in September the team will be revisiting all sites to clear the rubbish which has been generated from the clearance of unlet plots and undertake general tidying works. In addition to this they will be lifting small tree branches, where appropriate, to allow more light to penetrate onto shady plots and they will be raising gate heights to the height of the adjoining fences or hedges to improve security.

Vacant plots are starting to be occupied and our bookings team will be focused on the letting of the remaining vacant plots during September. We will keep you informed of progress on this in the September update.

A sting in the tail

During the clearance work no fewer than 20 wasp's nests were discovered and needed to be cleared by the Councils pest control team.

Is there a "community feel" at your allotment site?

Owning and enjoying an allotment means different things to different people, for some it is an opportunity to have quiet time on their own, for others it is an opportunity for social interaction and the opportunity to feel a part of a community with a shared interest.

If you would like to get involved, to be a part of a group or organisation at your site we would like to hear from you. Dave Cooper works within our Community Development Team and is available to help, advice and support any allotment holders that see an opportunity to develop the "community feel" at their site. If you have an interest in this aspect of the allotments then Dave would be keen to hear from you.

Dave can be contacted on dave.cooper@crawley.gov.uk or on direct dial number 01293 438655.

Best wishes

Colin Hayler – Allotments Officer.

Rob Channon – Facilities Manager.

Dave Cooper – Community Development Officer.

Appendix 4



ALLOTMENT TENANCY AGREEMENT INCLUDING REGULATIONS

An agreement made the day of 20...

Between Crawley Borough Council ('the council') and of

.....
(the tenant')

It is agreed:-

1. The council lets and the tenant takes on a tenancy for plot no, size.....sq m at allotment site.

Annual rent £, pro rata rent £

The tenancy is renewed each year on 1st October

2. The tenant agrees to:-

- i) Pay the rent within 40 days of date of invoice. Failure to do so will result in the termination of your tenancy
- ii) Work the land solely as an allotment to produce vegetables, fruit crops and flowers for yourself and your family. Bees, hens and rabbits can be kept with written permission from the council.
- iii) Keep the allotment clean, free from weeds and in good condition.
 - a) In year one at least 25% of the plot must be worked
 - b) In year two at least 50% of the plot must be worked
 - c) In year three at least 75% of the plot must be worked
 - d) In each case the remainder of the plot must be covered with a suitable heavy duty, permeable cover material (this can be purchased from the council at cost price).
- iv) Protect boundary fences, hedges, gate and noticeboards within the site. To report defects to the council. To maintain paths between plots ensuring they are kept to a minimum width of 2 feet (60 cm). To keep all ditches clear of waste.
- v) Allow any officer of the council access to inspect the site and individual plots.
- vi) Take proper precaution when using pesticides, weed killers and fertilizers to minimise any adverse effects on the environment and other allotment holders and to comply at all times with current regulations.
- vii) Only plant trees on dwarfing root stock
- viii) Return the plot(s) in a clean and tidy state if the tenancy is terminated
- ix) The council has the right to amend and update these rules and regulations.

3. The tenant agrees not to:-

- i) Sublet part or all of the plot(s)
- ii) Cause or permit any nuisance to any other allotment tenant or owners/ occupiers of property in the neighbourhood.
- iii) Prune or cut any trees, or remove/sell/ carry away any soil from the allotment site.
- iv) Erect a shed or any type of erection without permission from the council
- v) Deposit or allow to be deposited any materials other than manure/mulching material which should be delivered in quantities for immediate use.
- vi) Use a hosepipe of similar apparatus to water the allotment nor tie down percussion taps in the open position.
- vii) Bring or allow dogs into the site unless on a lead/leash.
- viii) Use barbed or razor wire for a fence adjoining any path.

4. The tenancy continues unless:-

- i) The rent is in arrears for more than forty days
- ii) The allotment is not being worked. Please note this refers to tenants who have held their plots for more than three months.
- iii) The tenant resides outside Crawley
- iv) The tenant dies
- v) By re-entry by the council at any time after giving three calendar months' notice, in writing, to the tenant on account of the plot being required i) for any purpose (not being the use of the same for agriculture) for which it was acquired or held by the council or has been appropriated under any statutory provision or ii) for building, mining or any other industrial purpose or for roads and sewers necessary in connection with any of these purposes.

5. Allocation of allotments will be limited to one per household when demand is high.

6. Notice of termination will be given by the council, under the terms of the agreement, in writing or by email. This will be effective from receipt of the notification by the tenant at his/her address alternatively the notice could be placed in clear view on the plot. If notice is given by the tenant this will be effective on receipt by the Facilities Department, Town Hall. The Facilities Department should be notified of any change of address.

7. In the event of termination of the agreement the tenant maybe entitled to compensation as explained in Section 2 sub- section (2) and (3) of the Allotments Act 1922, then as extended to the 1950 Allotments Act.

SIGNED by THE TENANT

Name

Address

Email address.....

Date