

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ALLOTMENTS (WATER CHARGES)
TASK AND FINISH GROUP**

Thursday, 7 September 2006

PRESENT:

Councillor Marion Allen (Chair)
Councillor Trini Crake
Councillor Les Patterson

Mr Oliver Northampton Allotments Network Co-Optee
Mr Care Northampton Allotments Network Co-Optee

Councillor Phil Larratt Portfolio Holder (item 3)

Tony Spiezick Street Scene and Environment Manager
Paul Chambers Team Leader
Tracy Tiff Scrutiny Officer

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor M Hoare and Carl Grimmer (Corporate Manager).

2. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 21 AUGUST 2006

Subject to the following amendments, the minutes of the meeting held on 21 August 2006 were agreed:-

Apologies

Carl Grimmer (Corporate Manager) to be included to the list of apologies.

Eastern Avenue Allotment Site

Delete 'There are no vacant plots'.

.... The road on the allotment site, adjacent to the housing

Blisworth Allotment Site

There are no leaks and **hoses** are not permitted.

.... Charges are **25p** per pole (**£2.50** per 10 pole site)
.. a **10 pole** plot (without water) equated to **£5.20**.

3. WITNESS EVIDENCE - PORTFOLIO HOLDER

Councillor P Larratt, Portfolio Holder, attended the meeting and answered the Task and Finish Group's questions as detailed below: -

How did the Council arrive at the current charging structure?

The Council arrived at the current charging structure by dividing the overall allotments water bill by the number of plots. An average was therefore calculated which was the

charge to each allotment tenant.

How did you arrive at the decision to implement water charges to allotment holders?

Due to reducing budgets and increased water charges, it was decided to look at other Local Authorities and how they re-coup their costs. It was then decided to look at the possible introduction of water charges to the allotment holders.

Why are water charges necessary?

Again due to increased water charges and usage it was decided that some of the monies should be re-couped from the allotment holders direct.

The Chair advised that a vast range of Local Authorities charge allotment holders for water usage. Mr Oliver commented that the allotment tenants were not opposed to paying water charges as long it is a right and proper system.

T Spiezick commented that to install individual water meters on every plot would be very expensive.

Leakage issues put up water usage and cost. Is there a short/medium/long-term plan to address the leakage issues on both financial and environmental grounds?

The Portfolio Holder reported that the Cabinet wants to address the problem of water leakages. Investigations are taking place to raise the required capital monies required to carry out all of the necessary repairs. Water leakages of a significant nature would have to be addressed. It was emphasised that there are pressures on the capital programme.

Allotments are a non-profitable operation to the Council. If an allotment site was sold, for example Harlestone Road, any surplus monies would be ringfenced for allotment investment and enhancement.

It is recognised that an Allotment Strategy was prepared which was not adopted.

In response to the Group's comment that the Council could borrow in the short term to repair water leakages, Councillor Larratt confirmed that he was happy to investigate this. For every £1 revenue spent, £20 could be borrowed. Mr Oliver added that in accordance with the Allotments Act 1908, any money from the sale of allotment land could be used to repay a loan. He then referred to the plans to replace all the 25 mm water piping with 50 mm piping, commenting that it did not appear to be cost effective to repair leaks if the water pipes were to be replaced.

T Spiezick confirmed that allotment tenants pay £30 rental charges per year which equates to £36,000 per annum. To repair the water piping at the Weston Favell allotment site would cost £13,500. Water leaks cost £1,800 per year.

The Chair advised that water charges cannot be investigated in isolation. In response to her query regarding the amount of water lost through leakage, T Spiezick confirmed it to be around 40% and major capital investment is required to rectify this.

How do you intend to tackle the issue of water charges?

By implementing them over a 3-year period. The Cabinet is willing to listen to advice and any recommendations of this Group. Changes could be introduced.

What is the administration's commitment to investment in allotments within the Borough?

Yes the administration is committed to providing successful and flourishing allotment sites that are fully occupied. It is looking to address the current over provision by sale of surplus sites in order to re-invest significantly in the remaining sites thereby enhancing the quality of the sites and facilities.

Councillor Larratt acknowledged that there is a problem with security on some of the allotment sites and there is a need to ensure this is addressed.

What are the plans for the future of allotment sites within the Borough?

Secure, but the issue of over provision needs to be addressed. Existing temporary sites need to be relocated and there future secured, and we are working through the planning process to ensure adequate provision in areas where facilities are lacking and as the population of the borough increases.

What happens to the proceeds from the sale of allotment sites?

In accordance to the 1908 Allotment Act proceeds from the sale of any allotments should be used to improve the facilities on the remaining sites left in the Borough.

What is the statutory requirement for the number of allotment sites that the Council has to provide for the Borough?

Section 23 of the 1908 Allotment Act states that, among others, Borough Councils have a duty to provide sufficient allotments according to demand, for letting to persons resident within their areas. The rate of provision is 0.2 hectares per 1000 population. 0.2 hectares per 1000 = 0.49 Acres per 1000 population. Our present position is 158.56 Acres. Therefore an over provision of 60.56 Acres plus Harlestone Road Site 2. The Council is looking to secure provision through the local development framework.

Councillor Larratt confirmed that the population figures for Northampton were based on the 2001 census. He acknowledged that some of the allotments are not located in the right place and that there is a need for more in the south of the town.

On an individual allotment site basis, what is the future for the temporary Mereway site?

Mereway site was set up as a temporary site only as there needs to be growth for the cemetery in Towcester Road. At the current usage around 7 years would see the need to expand the cemetery.

The Group conveyed its concerns regarding the Mereway Allotment Site and the fact that it was a temporary site and may close. It was requested that the site be made safe and acknowledged that Mereway was a good allotment site. In response, Councillor Larratt advised that Mereway was a temporary site and would eventually be secured for cemetery provision. There was not enough burial ground in the town. However, if the burial land issue was resolved for the next 20-30 years the status of Mereway allotment site could be reconsidered. Currently, there are 700 burials per year. The land at the Mereway allotment site would provide approximately 22 years of burials.

What is your view about allotment sites becoming the responsibility of Charitable Trusts with the land being leased to them by the Council?

This is an issue that should be investigated and the Cabinet is open to explore all avenues, and possibilities. Councillor Larratt confirmed that if it was decided for allotments to be managed by charitable trust, finance would be available to maintain the sites. It was noted that both Kettering Borough Council and Coventry City Council's allotments sites are managed by charitable trusts.

The Allotment Strategy was produced in October 2004. Has this Strategy been approved and implemented? If so, could it be used as an umbrella for a five-year plan for each allotment site?

This Strategy was prepared but not formally adopted. This needs to be revisited with a view to introducing some changes. Once approved and implemented it can be used as benchmark for the future.

Are there proposals to introduce a water conservation plan? For example, water butts, standpipes.

Not at present, until outcome of this Task and Finish Group is known.

Mr Oliver commented that if an allotment holder requested to put up a shed on their site, that the provision of a water butt should be a prerequisite.

What would be the merits/drawbacks of the Council introducing business plans for each allotment site in the borough?

Once the Strategy is implemented a natural progression would be to introduce a business plan for each site. Once the first business plan has been produced for an allotment site, it would act as the blueprint for each of the other sites.

4. OFFICER'S REPORTS

Water Usage on Allotment Sites

T Spiezick circulated a spreadsheet detailing the water cost for allotment sites up to 31 August 2006. The cost of water for the Bants Lane site was noted as £448. Concerns were also raised regarding the cost of water at the Rothersthorpe site at £655.32.

The Group heard that the Graspin Lane site had a major water leak. It would cost £13,500 to replace the pipes. The water bill was in the region of £1,800.

The Council is paying the standing charge for water provision for the Harlestone Road (2) allotment site. Until the future of the site has been decided, the Council will have to continue to pay the standing charge.

Water Leakages

T Spiezick advised that he had liaised with an independent water engineer who had confirmed that it was difficult to assess the water leakage costings without digging up the current pipework and evaluating each individual site. The consultant's fees would be in

the region of £3,000.

A price had been received for the relaying of a 32mm pipe from the mains to cover the site at Weston Favell - £11,630. To replace it with 50mm pipe would cost £13,500.

The Chair requested that a balance sheet be produced detailing, income, costs and the estimated leakage costs for all allotment sites. This information would be included in the final report.

Fencing Security Costs

Two sites were looked at regarding fencing issues:-

Mereway Allotment Site

Due to the fact that there is some existing fencing at Mereway allotment site, to introduce palisade fencing to the roadside hedged area, would cost in the region of £6,500.

Bants Lane

Due to Bants Lane being laid mainly to hedges, palisade fencing would be required around the whole perimeter, which would cost between £4,700 and £50,000, depending on groundworks required once the hedges had been removed.

In response to a query regarding the Council's maintenance contractor, T Spiezick advised that the maintenance of allotments was just a small part of the Mears contract.

T Spiezick confirmed that he would circulate the cost of one meter of palisade fencing. He would also provide the cost of installing palisade fencing to allotment sites.

Water leakage would be measured based on plot size, and the number of plots being worked.

The Group commented that if the Harlestone Road allotment site was sold, the proceeds of the sale could provide the capital needed to set up Charitable Trusts to run the allotment sites and assist them to be self-financing. The Group also supported individual business plans being produced for each allotment site. The Chair advised that this would be a major change and extensive consultation would be required.

Maintenance of Eastern Avenue (North) Allotment Site

T Spiezick advised that the maintenance of Eastern Avenue (North) allotment site was outside the remit of this Group but plans were in place for staff to walk the whole of the site, identify problems and draw up an action plan. Downsizing the site would also be investigated. This would take a few months to complete.

Flexible Charging

T Spiezick advised that after further investigation it appeared that NBC did not pay sewage charges to Anglian Water.

The possibility of introducing concessions for the following groups was considered:-

Over 60 years of age

Disabled users
Unemployed

It was noted that the majority of Local Authorities that gave concessions gave them to individuals over 60 years of age.

As the allotment holders are billed annually the charges would have to be based on the individual's circumstances one month prior to the bills being sent out, and then remain in force for that complete rental period of one year.

Individuals, who believe that they qualify for one the above categories, would have to write in to the allotments officer, and enclose copies of relevant documentation to support their claim to the discount.

The amount of the reduction, there are details available on the web for various sites across the UK detailing reductions from 25%-50% on the annual rent.

Providing allotment holders keep their details up to date, a database of this information can be kept for invoicing purposes.

Without knowing these details at present it cannot be calculated of how much lost revenue this represents to NBC. Consideration also needs to be given to disabled access to allotment sites.

The Group commented that there was a need for more disabled plots, i.e. smaller plots and raised beds.

DESKTOP RESEARCH - ALLOTMENT AND WATER CHARGES

Desktop research was carried out regarding allotment rental charges (including charges for water) with a number of Local Authorities: -

- Bedford Borough Council
- Nottingham City Council
- Leicester City Council (within Severn Trent Water Authority)
- Coventry City Council (within Severn Trent Water Authority)
- Cambridge City Council
- Luton Borough Council
- Southampton City Council
- Milton Keynes Borough Council
- Oxford City Council

Bedford Borough Council

Bedford Borough Council comes within Anglian Water Authority. The Council has five allotment sites in Bedford. A total of 608 plots. 90% of which are in use. Each plot is roughly 10 poles, with all five sites covering around 13.57 hectares of land in total. The current rates are £35.70 (per plot) per year. £20.90 per year for tenants on concessionary. There are no additional charges for the use of water. When a tenancy commences the Council offers to prepare the plot free of charge, whether it be flailing, chisel ploughing, rotovating or removing rubbish/structures. If a tenant would like any works completed after the initial preparation, there would be an additional charge. There are also a number of sites in Bedford which are owned by Parish Councils. Unfortunately, Bedford Borough Council does not have any information regarding these sites. The Council is currently reviewing its Allotments Policy.

Leicester City Council

Leicester City Council comes within Severn Trent Water Authority. There are 45 operational allotment sites across the city offering 3,200 cultivated plots. Annual rental costs are from £5 to £21 per 300 square yard plot, with the higher rates including all water charges.

There are 33 city allotments managed by local allotment societies. 22 allotment societies in Leicester all provide full-time stewards who look after the day-to-day management of their allotment sites. Societies may also offer the opportunity to buy compost, fertiliser, seeds and other gardening supplies on site. The remaining sites are owned by the City Council and leased directly to allotment holders. Direct let sites do not offer on-site management but site visits and any necessary maintenance work or repairs are carried out by the Council.

Coventry City Council

Coventry City Council comes within Severn Trent Water Authority. Allotments are run by Coventry and District Allotments and Gardens Council rather than the Council and the Council leases the allotment sites to Coventry and District Allotment Society. The Coventry and District Allotment Society then sub lets the plots to individual associations. Each association has a representative who agrees the charges on each plot. The current charges are £100 per acre per year, individual associations add fees to this such as subscriptions to the National Allotment Society, charges for watered meter usage and insurance (e.g. public liability). The average size of an allotment plot is 10 rods (250 square meters) and the charge is £15.18 per year. Each site has a water meter.

Luton Borough Council

Luton Borough Council comes within Three Valleys Water Authority. All allotment sites are Council owned. The current charges to allotment holders are £1.96 per pole for first class sites and £0.64 for second-class sites (without water/perimeter fencing) per year. Price increases are due to be implemented from 1 October 2006: - £2.20 per pole for first class sites and £0.70 per pole for a second-class site per year. No additional charges are made to allotment holders for water usage. It is envisaged that Luton Borough Council will shortly investigate the possibility of implementing water charges to allotment holders.

Southampton City Council

Southampton City Council comes within Southern Water Authority. All allotment sites are Council owned. The current annual charge to allotment holders are sites with water £3.04 per rod. The annual charge for a ten-rod site is £30.40. One rod equates to 25.3 square meters. Two sites have sheds and toilets and the annual rental charge is £6.75 per rod. The annual charge for a ten-rod site is £67.50. All allotment holders pay a £5 plot deposit and £5 key deposit.

Milton Keynes Borough Council

Milton Keynes Borough Council comes within Anglian Water Authority. Rental Charges for the Season from September 2005 - October 2006: -

- Category A Site with all facilities £2.98 per pole per annum (Including water)

- Category B Site with limited facilities £2.29 per pole per annum
- Category C Site with no facilities £1.84 per pole per annum It is proposed that rental charges will increase by 3% for the next season.

Senior Citizens, Registered Disabled, Persons Unemployed and Single Parent Families are entitled to a 50% reduction.

The Group supported Coventry City Council's allotment management system which is managed by Trusts. The Chair added the final report could include a recommendation that the Cabinet considers the management of the Council's allotments being undertaken by Trusts.

AGREED: **(1) That the information be noted.**
 (2) That the final report contain a recommendation that the Cabinet considers the management of the Council's allotments being undertaken by Trusts.

6. ATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting to finalise the Chair's report was noted as Friday 22 September at 2pm in the Jeffery Room at the Guildhall.

The meeting concluded at 6:00 pm