

AGENDA ITEM:
SUMMARY



Report for:	Strategic Planning & Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee
Date of meeting:	21 June 2011
PART:	
If Part II, reason:	

Title of report:	DBC Allotment Overview
Contact:	Mike Evans (Group Manger for Commercial Assets and Property Development) Author/Responsible Officer, Katy D'Souza – Outdoor Recreation Officer
Purpose of report:	1) To provide an update on the allotment management. 2) To consider new ways of working in order to improve the service.
Recommendations	1) To consider all possible areas to minimise financial outgoings and staff management costs in relation to the service. 2) To investigate other service providers in terms of both management and maintenance of Council allotment sites.
Corporate objectives:	
Implications:	<u>Financial</u> At the present time the service runs at a deficit. The report highlights the deficiencies within the service and following investigation of other management systems these costs could potentially be diminished.
'Value For Money Implications'	
Risk Implications	Risk Assessment to be undertaken.

Equalities Implications	Equality Impact Assessment to be undertaken
Health And Safety Implications	There are no specific health and safety implications arising from this report.
Consultees:	Valuation and Estate Manager Group Manger for Commercial Assets and Property Development

1. Background

1.1. DBC Allotments

The Council look after 16 allotment sites in Hemel Hempstead which provide 480 plots of varied sizes. The size of the sites vary considerably with the smallest site having 3 plots and the largest over 100 plots.

Allotment Site	Neighbourhood	Number Of Plots
Adeyfield Road	Adeyfield	24
Bennetts End Road	Bennetts End	46
Brickmakers Lane	Adeyfield	34
Bury Road	Town Centre	25
Candlefield Walk	Bennetts End	12
Chambersbury Lane	Nash Mills	14
Chaulden	Chaulden	149
Farland Road	Adeyfield	14
Gravel Hill	Warners End	79
High Street Green	Adeyfield	22
Hobletts Road	Adeyfield	8
Homefield Road	Adeyfield	12
Sheepcote Road	Adeyfield	13
Widmore Drive North	Adeyfield	11
Widmore Drive South	Adeyfield	3
Windmill Road	Adeyfield	14

1.2. General Allotment Site Management

The allotments previously came under Landscape and Recreation but were transferred to Commercial Asset & Property Development in 2010. Within this service the responsibility of allotments has been transferred from the Facilities Management Team to the Valuation & Estates Team.

The general day to day management and administration of allotment sites is undertaken by the Outdoor Recreation Officer of which a maximum of 40% of time is spent dealing with the allotments. There are currently no resources for the provision of cover.

The maintenance and improvement of the infrastructure of the 16 sites is limited within the constraints of the allotment budgets.

1.3. Other Allotment Sites In Dacorum

Sites elsewhere in the Borough are managed by the Local Parish, Town Council or community organisations.

In order to identify the allotment provision across the Borough, where information is not readily available, Town and Parish Councils have been contacted and asked to provide details in order that this information can be accumulated.

The information gathered so far on other allotments within the Borough is as follows:

Area	Site Name	Managed By	Number of Plots
Aldbury	Glebe Allotments	Aldbury Parish Council	50 plots
Berkhamsted Town Council	Dellfield Sunnyside Butts Meadow	Town Council	375 plots
Bovingdon	No allotments	N/A	0
Chipperfield	The Common	Unknown	Unknown
Flamstead	Singlets Lane	Flamstead Garden Association	Unknown
Flaunden	No allotments	N/A	0
Great Gaddesden	Pipers Hill Gaddesden Row	Great Gaddesden Parish Council	Unknown
Kings Langley	Church Lane	Kings Langley Allotment & Garden Association (owned by Parish)	Unknown
Little Gaddesden	No allotments	N/A	0
Markyate	Rear of Bartholomew Green	Allotment Society	Unknown
Nash Mills	Red Lion Lane	Kings Langley Allotments & Gardens Association (Leased from DBC)	Unknown
Nettleden with Potten End	Plough Lane	Unknown	Unknown
Northchurch	New Road Allotments	Northchurch	Unknown
Tring Town Council	Bulbourn Duckmore Lane	Town Council	93
Wigginton	Chesham Road	Wigginton Poor's Allotment Charity (not related to PC)	25

2. Current Position

2.1. Allotment Rent

The Allotment rent is set on an annual basis which is agreed by Cabinet.

The current rent is £3.00 per pole (25sqm) per annum which did not increase in 2010.

Cabinet have agreed an increase to £4.00 per pole (25sqm) for 2011.

Each tenant is invoiced for the rent yearly in October. It is estimated that the average cost to the Council to send an invoice is £15.00. The average cost of a plot (which is 5 poles) is currently £15.00 per annum.

Based on the outgoing costs, a further increase in rent could be considered in order to cover the maintenance costs.

If rents were to increase further it would be important to consider the introduction of a reduced fee for those over the ages of 65, on a low income or on benefits.

In order to cover the maintenance costs of the Council allotments without accounting for management and administration costs, the rent would need to increase to £6.00 per pole making the average price of a plot £30.00 per year.

The Council could also consider the introduction of an initial administration fee when an allotment is taken on and for any future plot changes etc. This is already in place at some other Councils including St Albans.

2.2. Allotment Budgets

Allotment budgets are set on an annual basis as part of the Council's budget setting process.

Income/Expenditure:

2011/2012 Budget:	Water and Sewerage Charges	£1,600.00
	Site Repairs and Maintenance	£9,000.00
	Water Point Improvements/Repairs	£2,000.00
	Total	£12,600.00

Income 2010/2011: £6,225.13

Projected Income for 2011/2012: £8,400.00

Using the projected income figure, this would suggest that for 2011/2012 the allotments will be subsidised by 33% before taking into consideration management and administration fees.

2.3. Allotment Applicants

For a prospective allotment holder to add their name to the allotment waiting list, an allotment application form needs to be completed and returned to the Outdoor Recreation Officer. The allotment application form can currently be downloaded from the Council Website or requested from the Outdoor Recreation Officer.

Members of the public are currently able to have their name added to one site, selected sites or to all sixteen sites. They are also allowed to be added to the waiting list if they already have a plot. It would therefore be beneficial to review this and put guidelines in place.

The allotment application form currently needs to be updated to include up to date rental fees and contact information. Furthermore we are currently looking to add an online application form.

2.4. Allotment Waiting List

The current waiting lists have recently been extracted into a new database and can be separated into separate lists or displayed as a complete waiting list.

From the records, the waiting list for the Council allotments (as at May 2011) is as follows:

Allotment Site	Number on Waiting List	Backdating to:
Adeyfield Road	73	June 2007
Bennetts End Road	55	April 2008
Brickmakers Lane	69	October 2006
Bury Road	93	February 2007
Candlefield Walk	55	October 2007
Chambersbury Lane	63	December 2007
Chaulden	111	January 2008
Farland Road	47	April 2007
Gravel Hill	114	August 2007
High Street Green	81	February 2006
Hobletts Road	53	September 2005
Homefield Road	36	June 2006
Sheepcote Road	40	June 2007
Widmore Drive North	61	July 2007
Widmore Drive South	47	April 2007
Windmill Road	42	April 2008
Total:	1040	
Total Number of Applicants:	401	

We have experienced a number of issues with incorrect records which has slowed the process of letting vacant plots. We have therefore begun the process of updating all of the 16 waiting lists. In order to do this we have contacted each person on the list in order that interest is reconfirmed and up to date contact details are provided. The deadline for replies is the 27th June 2011. Records will then be updated and anyone who has not replied will be removed from the list completely.

It is recommended that the waiting lists are closed to new enquiries for the Dacorum Borough Council allotment sites and to review this on an annual basis. The waiting list potentially could remain closed until everyone who joined the list in 2009 is offered a plot.

2.5. Allotment Agreements

Once a plot becomes free, it is offered to the first person on the waiting list for that site. If possible the applicant is contacted by telephone or email although due to the records currently in place most applicants are sent an offer letter in the post.

If no reply is received within the time frame provided, the applicant is then removed from the waiting list and the plot is offered to the next on the waiting list.

If interested the prospective tenant has previously been given the option to view the plot to confirm if they wish to take it, and then asked to sign two copies of the agreement and provide a cheque for the first years rent.

Currently, when offered a plot at one site, applicants are allowed to stay on the list for other sites. In consideration of demand, it would be recommended that once offered a plot, the applicant be removed from all other waiting lists unless there should be good reason not to.

2.6. Tenant/Applicant Data – New Database

On the transfer of the service it became apparent that no written procedures were in place. Furthermore a number of processes needed to be modernised.

A new allotment database has therefore been produced that will enable the Council to manipulate the data in order to produce mail merges, reports and hold a wider range of data. This has also enabled various practices that were proving to be time consuming and unproductive to be eliminated.

Now the data has been transferred and the database has gone live it is important that the data transferred from the old records is rectified and updated where necessary.

The first step is to update the waiting list records, which is currently in process (as detailed in 2.4).

All tenant paper records have been checked against the electronic records. Over 100 minor amendments that need to be made have been identified and 76 records have been identified that need to be separately checked/investigated. It would however

also be recommended that all tenant files are updated in order to include telephone and email address details in order that tenants can be contacted more easily.

2.7. Allotment Rules & Regulations

The Council receive a number of enquiries from tenants asking about the rules and regulations of the allotment sites.

The rules are currently set out on the conditions of hire (please see Appendix 1) which is a separate document from the allotment agreement. It is evident that there is confusion and therefore we are currently in the process of reviewing the rules and regulations in place with the aim of combining the conditions within the agreement to ensure all tenants are made aware from the beginning.

2.8. Allotment Plots

There are currently site plans in place for all the Council allotment sites detailing each plot. The plans however are old and in need of updating.

On inspecting sites it is evident plot numbers are not being displayed which can make it difficult to identify certain plots, particularly on the larger sites. It is therefore recommended that it is a requirement for all plot holders to display their plot number as part of the terms of the agreement.

The records detailing the size of plots have been incorrect on various occasions. It would therefore also be useful to verify the size of plots although this would be a large and lengthy task.

Sites are inspected as often as possible to ensure that plots are being worked in accordance with the Conditions of Hire. If a plot is not being worked or the annual rent is not paid then action is taken and if necessary, Notice to Quit is issued. It is however recommended that the agreement clearly details what the expectations are in terms of the minimum amount that must be cultivated and the actions to be taken should this not be the case. It is recommended that once a tenant is contacted with regards to the inadequate state of their plot, they are given one month to make improvements or are sent a Notice to Quit. This however is not currently possible to carry out with the resources in place.

There are a number of current tenants who hold one or more plots. As opposed to the creation of new sites, in mind of budget constraints and current demand, it would be recommended to contact all those tenants with two or more plots and enforce that tenants are allowed a maximum of two plots.

This could then be reviewed to see if tenants should only be allowed one plot. However, we would need to ensure that resources were available to carry this out to avoid plots becoming overgrown and unused.

All plots are currently let or under offer. There are currently 34 plots that are in the process of being let. Plots that have been neglected are in the process of being inspected and tenants contacted.

2.9. Site Security

All Council allotment sites are fenced and all, with the exception of two sites, have padlocked gates to control access. All but one of the fourteen padlocked sites have combination locks, with the Candlefield Walk site having a key lock to which all plot holders have a copy.

There are a variety of fencing types used on the allotment sites, including palisade, closeboard and chainlink fencing. There are also hedge boundaries and the rear boundaries of neighbouring properties (which are not Dacorum Borough Council's responsibility).

There is however the issue of a number of gate accesses leading on to the allotment sites from neighbouring gardens. Although often it is an access for a tenant of the site this is not always the case and should be looked into further. It is recommended that signage is displayed within the allotment sites detailing that private accesses are not permitted in order to protect the Council's interests.

2.10. Water Provision

All 16 sites currently have mains water provision with the exception of the recently reinstated plots at Bennetts End.

The reinstated plots at Bennetts End will act as a pilot project for rainwater harvesting systems.

In mind of the cost of water bills and repairs it is important to consider steps that could be taken at other sites to reduce these costs. It could therefore be beneficial to consider installing water harvesting systems.

Furthermore it is recommended that as a condition of the Council's approval of an application for a shed, tenants must also supply drainage and a water butt.

2.11. Selling Surplus Produce

The conditions of hire do not explicitly state that surplus produce can't be sold although it is evident that there is confusion on the subject. If the Council were to receive a request for surplus produce to be sold within the allotment sites, it would need to be investigated fully and the situation would need to be monitored which there are currently no resources for.

2.12. Warden Roles

There are Allotment Wardens in place at some of the Council allotment sites. Allotment Wardens receive a plot free of charge.

It is evident from both allotment tenants and Wardens that there is confusion with regards to the role of the Warden. We have therefore drafted a Warden Role (Appendix 2) so that the responsibilities are clearly outlined.

Once this has been reviewed and agreed upon, we will then be looking to approach the current Wardens to ensure they are happy to continue in their newly defined role.

Where this is not the case, or where there is a vacancy, all allotment holders will be offered the opportunity to apply. This will be done either by displaying a notice within the site or by writing to all allotment holders.

In view of resources, the role and responsibilities of Wardens could prove crucial in assisting with the efficient management of all sites particularly to ensure all plots are being utilised.

2.13. Allotment Website Page

In order to minimise administration and time spent dealing with general enquiries, it is recommended that we improve the DBC allotment website page significantly.

We are looking to include details of all allotment sites within the Borough, details of the location of Dacorum's allotment sites & the number of people on each waiting list, provision of an online application facility, details of the allotment rules and regulations, allotment rents, related links and answers to frequently asked questions.

It may also be possible to create an online allotment forum so feedback can be received for the Outdoor recreation Officer to review.

2.14. Allotment Associations

Hemel Hempstead Society for Allotment & Leisure Gardeners (HHSALG) provides a opportunity for people with an interest in gardening or growing their own fruit and vegetables to discuss relevant issues. The association has recently taken a lease of land from the Council in order to provide allotments in Grovehill to help meet local demand.

It is suggested that the Council look to strengthen the relationship with the Association.

2.15. New Allotment Sites

The Council are currently working in Partnership with Groundwork to reinstate an allotment site in Bennetts End. The site has been cleared and fenced and the plots marked out. The number of plots at Bennetts End Allotments has therefore increased from 21 to 46. The plots are in the process of being let and will help to significantly reduce the waiting list within the area.

The Council have leased an area of land in Grovehill to HHSALG in order to increase allotment provision. The Association will be reinstating the site and responsible for the future running of the site.

The Council currently have no further plans for creating new sites within the Borough although HHSALG have been looking into other potential locations within Hemel Hempstead in the Gadebridge and Chaulden areas.

2.16. Opportunities for Additional Plots Within DBC's Existing Sites

There are potential opportunities for additional plots within the Council's existing allotment sites. The community payback team have been approached in order to try and assist in clearing areas that we may be able to utilise as additional plots.

The initial areas that have been requested to look at are:

- Windmill Road
- Chaulden
- Gravel hill

Plots have however been cleared by various community groups in the past and then remained vacant due to resourcing issues. It is therefore important to ensure that if this does take place, resources are available to oversee the works and undertake the letting of the plots.

3. The Way Forward

As with many areas over the country the demand for allotments is increasing. It is therefore important that the Council streamline the management of allotments in order to provide an efficient and cost effective service.

3.1. Outsourcing Options

In mind of the resources currently in place and the current service level, it would be beneficial to consider a variety of options including investigating the possibility of other service providers running the Council allotment sites.

3.2. Head Lease of DBC Allotments

The Council could possibly look to hand over all responsibility for the allotments to another organisation with the exception of consultation on the allotment rents to be charged.

Possible organisations to approach:

- HHSALG
- Sunnyside Rural Trust
- Boxmoor Trust

Please note this is not an extensive list and would need to be opened to other organisations.

The option of a head lease of all Council allotments would be useful to investigate further to see what organisations may have the capacity and expertise to do so in order to provide a more efficient service.

3.3. Outsourcing Day To Day Management

The everyday management of the allotments is extremely intensive and involves a high administration level. In some cases Local Authorities have therefore looked

towards other organisations to do this on the Council's behalf. The allotments of the Borough of Poole and Worthing Borough Council are both examples of where this has been done and are managed by Continental Landscapes Ltd who operate throughout the country and offer a range of services that include every aspect of landscape construction and maintenance. For an agreed fee, each Council use the company to undertake various tasks suitable to their needs.

We have therefore contacted Continental Landscapes Ltd in order to get a better idea of the services they could potentially offer and at what price. This option could potentially alleviate resourcing issues whilst ensuring the Council retains a high level of control over the allotment sites.

3.4. New Allotment Company Ltd

The New Allotment Company Ltd offers a range of services including the provision of allotment sites. They are a private company and therefore only provide allotments at a commercial rate. They have set up a private allotment site in Kent and charge £150.00 per plot per annum.

The Council could potentially look to the New Allotment Company Ltd to help with the provision of new allotments within the area, should there be evidence of demand and the willingness of residents to pay the commercial rates.

The company also offer the potential of investing in a site in order that the Council can then rent the site and let plots to local residents. This however would have to be at a higher cost than other Council sites unless rents were subsidised.

The company would also potentially be able to take on the day to day management responsibilities of running the Council allotments.

3.5. Devolved Management

Devolved management involves devolving a share of responsibility for managing allotment sites to the allotment gardeners themselves and can benefit both local authorities and their allotment tenants.

Advantages for the ploholders include a sense of pride and ownership, the ability for necessary works to be carried out quickly, effective promotion of vacant plots, retention of the rents, and greater opportunity to secure funding.

The benefit for the Council is the potential to make savings with a reduced burden of administration, customer liaison and maintenance responsibilities.

It is recognised that not all associations are able or willing to take on devolved management and it can therefore be important to reach an agreement that suits both parties. In order to do this a phased approach is often required.

3.6. Internal Management of Allotments

Should the Council look to keep the management of the allotments in-house, in addition to general day to day management of allotments, the following summary of actions would need to be addressed:

- Finish gathering details on all allotment sites within the Borough
- Update application form
- Produce online application facility
- Review allotment applicant guidelines
- Complete waiting list update
- Complete review of the allotment agreements and terms & conditions
- Update tenant paper & electronic records
- Contact all current tenants for additional contact information (and to re-issue terms & conditions)
- Update of allotment plans
- Enforce display of plot numbers
- Display signage in relation to private accesses in allotment sites
- Investigate water harvesting systems
- Put warden roles in place
- Improve the Council's allotment website page

Appendix 1

CONDITIONS OF HIRE

The tenant hereby agrees with the Council as follows: -

1. The tenancy shall commence on the first day of the month in which the tenancy is agreed, through to the thirtieth day of the following September and annually thereafter from the first day of October. The rent shall be paid from the first day of the month in which the tenancy is agreed through to the thirtieth day of the following September and thereafter annually from the first of October to the thirtieth of the following September. Should the annual rent remain unpaid forty days after the due date, one months notice to Quit will be issued to the tenant by the Landlord.
2. Any authorised member or officer of Dacorum Borough Council shall be entitled at any time, when directed by the said Council, to enter and inspect the allotment.
3. The tenant shall keep the allotment in a good state of cultivation and free from weeds and shall not deposit or permit or suffer to be deposited any refuse, rubbish or extraneous matter. Carpeting must not be used to cover the ground. The Landlord shall reserve the right to issue one months Notice to Quit if after the first 3 months of a new tenancy any of these conditions are not adhered to or if after one warning letter to an existing tenant these conditions are not adhered to..
4. Upon the termination of the agreement Dacorum Borough Council shall be entitled to recover from the tenant compensation in respect of any costs incurred by the Landlord to clear the plot of any building structure, refuse, rubbish or extraneous matter.
5. The tenant shall give up and maintain a strip of land 9” in width on each side of and also at each end of the allotment plot to form footpaths and shall keep this part of the footpaths in a permanent good and tidy condition.
6. The tenant shall not cause or permit any nuisance or annoyance to the occupier of any other allotment garden or obstruct or encroach on any path or roadway set out by the Council for the use of the occupier of the allotment gardens.
7. In line with Environmental Health recommendations, bonfires are not allowed on Dacorum Borough Council allotment sites. Any unwanted waste material must be taken off site by the tenant and disposed of in a proper manner.
8. The tenant may not bring or cause to be brought into the allotment garden any dog unless the dog is held on a leash.
9. The tenant may not keep any animals or livestock of any kind upon the allotment.
10. The tenant may not keep a hose permanently attached to a water tap or leave a hose running unattended
11. The Council shall have the right to refuse admittance to any person other than the tenant or a member of his family to the allotment garden unless accompanied by the tenant or a member of his/her family.
12. The tenancy may be terminated (a) by either party giving to the other, written notice expiring on the 30th September in any year or (b) in the manner set out in Section 1 of the Allotments Act 1922 or any statutory amendment thereof for the time being in force.
13. The tenant shall not assign or transfer the tenancy hereby created or sub-let to any other person.
14. The Dacorum Borough Council shall bear and pay all rates chargeable in respect of the allotment.
15. No tool shed or other building shall be erected on the allotment without the written consent of Dacorum Borough Council given under the hand of the Valuation & Estates Manager.
16. The tenant shall not, without written consent of Dacorum Borough Council, cut or prune any timber or other trees or take, fell or carry away any minerals, gravel, sand or clay.
17. A tenancy shall automatically terminate on the 31th March or the 30th September next after the death of a tenant.
18. A tenant shall not lift or interfere with any manhole, sewer or drain and shall not interfere with any property of Dacorum Borough Council for the use of the tenant or any other tenant of Dacorum Borough Council.
19. Any case of dispute between the tenant and any other occupier of the allotment garden shall be referred to the Council and the decision of any Council officer appointed to hear the dispute shall be final.
20. The tenant shall inform the Council of any change of his/her address.
21. The tenancy is subject to the Allotments Rules made from time to time by Dacorum Borough Council and to the Allotments Act 1908 to 1950 so far as they are applicable.

VALUATION & ESTATE MANAGER

Appendix 2

Allotment Warden - Roles and Responsibilities

Allotment Site:	
Warden's Name:	
Warden's Plot Num:	
Warden's Contact Number:	

- To be the main point of contact for all tenants on the site, acting as intermediary between tenants and the Council.
- Undertake monthly inspections of the site and plots using the inspection sheet provided and report back to DBC.
- Show new prospective tenants round the site advising of rules and tenancy agreement.
- Ensure all tenants abide by the rules and tenancy agreement and report back to DBC where this is not the case.
- Undertake some maintenance work on site e.g. clearing pathways etc
- Attend quarterly meetings with the Outdoor Recreation Officer and other Wardens.
- Provide gardening advice and assistance to tenants where requested.
- Keep the Council informed of any problems with the site, e.g. security problems, water leaks etc.