

Members of the Allotments Working Group

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Chair's Foreword

Chairing the Allotments Working Group has been a rewarding experience and I felt privileged to be involved.

The group was established as a result of a culmination of the various difficult issues affecting the running of allotments in Bradford. There is a widely shared view that for a number of years the Allotments Service has been under-resourced and hence has not provided the service allotment holders might have wished. Funding was addressed to an extent in the Council's 2009/10 budget when additional resources, both revenue and one-off capital, were injected and this has enabled the Service to embark on a journey of improvement. The four meetings of the Working Party have identified a fund of energy, expertise and good-will amongst allotment groups. The hope is that these might be harnessed to the additional resources to take the Service further along the road of improvement.

There was a positive buzz about our meetings and I am heartened by people's genuine desire to be part of the group that would help take the use of allotments forward throughout the district. My fellow colleagues Councillor Cole and Councillor Heseltine have both been exceptional in their support and contribution to the report.

I feel encouraged by the whole experience and I am sure we have produced a report that will stand scrutiny and look forward to seeing outstanding developments within the Allotment Service.

Councillor Hawarun Hussain

Chair, Allotments Working Group

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Background

At its meeting on 17 November 2009 the Regeneration & Economy Improvement Committee considered a report outlining the arrangements that were currently in place for the management of the Council's allotment sites.

The Committee Resolved –

That an “ad hoc” working group be established, comprising of Council officers, elected Members and community allotment holders and that it report back to the Committee in April 2010.

The Scrutiny Process

It was agreed that Cllr Hawarun Hussain would chair the Working Group, and officers from the allotments service worked closely with Cllr Hussain to facilitate meetings and information gathering.

Members of the Working Group held 4 meetings and have received and gathered a range of information from a number of different sources, including other local authorities.

The overall aim of the working group was:

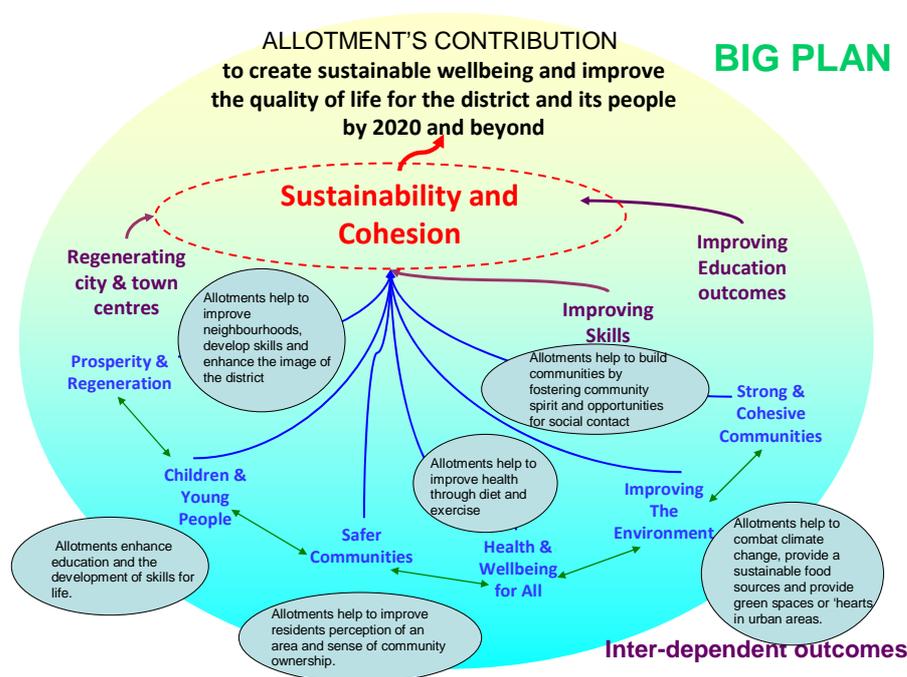
To examine the current arrangements, and identify constraints faced by allotment tenants and associations, as well as looking at best practice with regard to way allotments sites operate, with a view to making recommendations on how things could be improved.

Chapter 2 – Findings and Recommendations

This report presents the findings and conclusions the working group has made as a result of its discussions and research. It also makes a number of recommendations for action by the Council.

The report uses 3 comparator authorities; Barnsley, Bristol and Calderdale, and a table of the areas of comparison can be found at Appendix 1.

The value of allotments



Allotments tick all the boxes - they can contribute greatly to a healthy, sustainable, economically active community.

ALLOTMENTS IMPACT ON ALL THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

Prosperity and Regeneration

Allotments support regeneration by improving skill levels, encouraging enterprise/volunteering, improving the image of the District, all of which align with the Council's "Big Plan" (the District's Sustainable Community Strategy). Indeed, Lord Heseltine referred to horticulture as 'an essential ingredient' in urban regeneration. The horticulture industry is worth £1.2Bn to the British economy, with food growing an increasing proportion of the domestic market. In addition, allotments offer productive activity for those outside of the

labour market. They can also reduce social isolation, help build self-esteem and resilience.

Then, of course, plot holders reap what they sow: low-cost fruit and vegetables - particularly important for low-income households and at this time of rising food prices (it has been suggested that up to £950 p.a. can be saved by a family growing their own food).

Knowing exactly where your food comes from has benefits with regards food security and community self-reliance, which could gain importance in the long term.

Children and young people

The opportunity to experience the world outside the classroom first-hand is recognised as improving children's educational achievement, especially important with Bradford's low education outcomes. More specifically, qualifications, skills, knowledge and understanding can be gained at different levels in science or horticultural disciplines.

Allotments help people consider the impacts of food production generally. Young people in particular need reconnection with the natural world, specifically where food is produced, and knowing how to cook and prepare healthy, nutritious food. Single parents seem to recognise this, as they are the most likely group to want to rent an allotment nationally. Allotments support initiatives such as Healthy Schools, Change4Life. There already exist several local initiatives involving children working safely and successfully on allotments (see Case Study 1), and these could be extended to enable our children and young people to achieve their full potential.

Safer communities

The National Trust suggests that allotments have the potential to bring people together in ways that other public spaces often do not - and growing projects have shown that they can successfully help reform habitual drug abusers (e.g. The Monty Project), tackle crime and reduce re-offending rates.

The best way to combat vandalism is to involve potential vandals positively, as do community allotment projects. The recommended safeguard against it is to have lots of people out and about: full tenancy is the best way to reduce petty theft and damage to property on an allotment site. Communities then feel safer and fear crime less.

Health and wellbeing for all

The Big Plan notes that the general health of people in the District is generally worse than the national average, with shorter life expectancy. There are well-documented mental health benefits from working outside on the land. It reduces stress, provides a sense of purpose and achievement, and is believed to reduce the risk of dementia by 36%. Gardening is widely recognised as restorative and therapeutic.

There are also improvements to be gained to physical health. Poor diet is implicated in one third of the cases of cancer and one third of cardiovascular disease in Britain, and costs an estimated £7 billion per annum. Obesity is linked to Type II diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some types of cancer; yet projections indicate that 40% of the population will be obese by 2025. There is ample evidence that hands-on growing experiences promote the uptake of healthier diets. The work of Bradford's Ministry of Food can be enhanced by people growing their own.

Allotmenting is a form of exercise accessible to many who would not go to a gym. Digging is equivalent to aerobic exercise, and uses 350 calories per hour - the same as cycling at 15mph. It is evident that allotments can play an important role in the Big Plan's aims to improve the District's health.

Improving the environment

Allotments support a sustainable community, and promote attractive, well-cared for neighbourhoods. They help reduce the District's carbon footprint: less food miles as fruit and vegetables are produced locally, seasonal food means less energy used in food production (e.g. for artificial lighting/ heating, irrigation), little or no packaging (6.3 M tonnes each year comes into British homes), increased habitats and therefore biodiversity, and improved waste management through composting.

Allotments also absorb CO2 and excess rainfall, helping to minimise flooding, and can provide opportunities for demonstrating / educating about composting, recycling, water conservation, alternative energy, compost toilets, bees, biodiversity, and organic gardening. They have helped to maintain the genetic diversity of the seed bank.

Strong and cohesive communities

Gardening is a hugely popular pastime, with 11 million people enjoying it in Britain. Allotments provide valuable opportunities for bringing people together via their shared passion, for example sharing food, holding celebrations or plant swaps. These kinds of activities are recognised by as having 'real impact' on communities. They are particularly valuable for including people with disabilities and/or special needs, and for inter-generational work: as the National Trust recognises, gardens are great levellers, and Bradford's allotments illustrate this.

There are many local examples of diverse groups coming together to grow. 'A successful economy supports and depends on strong communities and good relations between them' - Bradford's allotments can, and do, make an important contribution to a strong, cohesive community.

Strategies for better use of allotments

Preserving existing allotments

Maintaining the Council's precious 'land bank' of existing allotments will become even more important in the future, given the Peak Oil/ food security/ high unemployment issues.

In the last 30 years, nationally 200,000 allotments (equivalent to 11 square miles) have been lost. Since the recent increase in the popularity of 'growing your own', demand is so high for food growing spaces that the National Trust are offering land for allotments, and British Waterways and Network Rail look set to follow suit.

The Landshare initiative, matching spare land to prospective growers, has 40,000 people signed up. There are an estimated 100,000 people on allotment waiting lists, with some having to wait up to 40 years! Bradford District follows this trend, with 1273 people on Council allotment waiting lists in 2009 - although on four sites in deprived areas, vacant plots remain available.

There are several ways in which Bradford Council could make better use of existing allotments. The development of a strategy at an early stage would help, and is to be encouraged and supported by all parties. The strategy should also cover planning, promotion and protection of allotments for now and the future.

Recommendation 1

That the Strategic Director Regeneration develops a strategy regarding better use of allotments incorporating the following key points:-

- (i) Tenants not cultivating their plots should be encouraged to give up their plots promptly; new tenants should be given support via training, and help to clear overgrown plots
- (ii) Increase the offer of mini-plots, from which they can then graduate to a bigger area
- (iii) Plots could be subdivided into half or a quarter to enable older and disabled / less mobile users to take on smaller areas
- (iv) Continue a collaborative approach across local authority boundaries to address the fact that allotment demand is outstripping supply
- (v) Consider how to combine services and pool budgets across departments and agencies to support allotments, deliver more to tenants, and provide better/ more strategic outcomes
- (vi) Where there are unused allotments the Council should seek to engage with people in the local community with a view to them becoming allotment holders
- (vii) Where unused allotments have become overgrown the Council should engage a "blitz" workforce, to bring the plots up to a usable condition
- (viii) Develop ways of increasing allotment supply and put on hold any plans to sell allotments land for development

Strategies to increase the supply of allotments

In the meantime, Bradford Council could increase the supply of food growing areas in the following ways:

1. Require developers to incorporate greenspace, including allotment areas, into all new large scale housing developments using section 106, 278 and / or any other relevant agreements as part of development application approvals.

Recommendation 2

That, as part of the Local Development Framework, the Strategic Director Regeneration considers including a planning obligation on developers of large sites to incorporate allotment areas either within the site or within the neighbourhood as part of the “community benefit”.

2. Positively encourage other edible landscaping initiatives e.g. roof gardens, growing food in school/community centre grounds.
3. Positively encourage local residents to petition for additional allotments capacity, and examine ways of accommodating the demand.
4. Make vacant land available to community groups for food growing on a temporary basis on a 'meanwhile lease'. As part of this, it could establish a 'community land bank', where such partnerships between landowners and community groups would be brokered.

This would enable vacant brownfield sites in urban areas to be used for food growing, particularly while the recession slows building plans. Sheffield City Council has already requested that government gives them a 'rebuttable right' to enter into temporary leases compulsorily with owners of vacant brownfield land, which they can then sublease to community groups.

5. With the support of the Large Private Estate Commission, bring under-utilised land into community use on a medium-term basis (e.g. 10 years). By 2012, 100% of land will be registered with the Land Registry (currently 30% is unregistered), which will provide this opportunity.

Recommendation 3

That the Allotments Service pursues the actions identified in points 2 to 5 above regarding the supply of allotments.

Communication

The Working Group felt that communication channels needed to be opened up, and that the service needs to adopt an effective, positive and pro-active approach to engaging with existing and potential tenants.

There is a strong need for improved engagement with citizens, in particular those hard to reach groups, including disabled, elderly and British Minority Ethnic groups.

Officers would benefit from increased opportunity to network with colleagues in other authorities, sharing best practice.

Current methods of communication with tenants include a newsletter produced by the Allotments Service which is circulated annually, information sheets for tenants on specific subjects and noticeboards at some sites. However, currently only seven sites have notice boards.

It was suggested that a regular article could be placed in “Community Pride” - the Council newsletter to residents.

“Allotment Forums” are a good way for tenants to share good practice and also a constructive way of providing feedback to the Allotments Service. Forums will be used to develop and maintain good tenant relations to support and encourage people.

Closer engagement with the community could be facilitated by representatives from the Allotments Service attending Neighbourhood Forums, meetings at community centres and liaising closely with churches and mosques and other groups.

It was felt that the use of the internet was now an essential communication tool and the service should consider building a user friendly area as part of www.bradford.gov.uk, which should contain all relevant allotments information. This would be a key way to reach many citizens.

Members agreed that all promotion and publicity information should be clear, easy to read and contain the contact details and website information for the service.

It is essential to improve co-ordination and working with all other Council departments, in particular Finance.

Recommendation 4

That with regard to improving and increasing the methods of communication, the Strategic Director Regeneration

- (i) provides notice boards at all allotment sites wherever possible
- (ii) arranges for a promotional article to be placed in the Council publication “Community Pride” twice a year
- (iii) supports officers work with tenants to establish Allotment Forums
- (iv) arranges for the Allotments service staff to attend Neighbourhood Forums to promote the work of the Allotments Service
- (v) arranges for officers to develop user friendly “Allotments” web pages as part of the Bradford.gov site, as soon as possible

There also appeared to be a lack of communication and co-operative working between the allotments service and other Council departments in particular, the Finance department. Situations had arisen where tenants had been sent a “notice to quit” for non payment of rent from one department, despite having already made the payment.

Recommendation 5

That the Strategic Director Regeneration establishes a system whereby the Allotments Service receive timely copies of all relevant correspondence sent to tenants by other departments of the Council and vice versa.

Water self sufficiency

Using techniques such as permaculture, sites can become more water self sufficient. Permaculture is about making the most of the available resources and working with nature, not against it.

Water self-sufficiency on allotment sites need not be restricted to individual plot holders having a structure with gutters and a water butt. Sites can look at the bigger picture at communal water capture, either from shared buildings on site, or even neighbouring buildings. For example, if there is a business next door with a large roof, might they be willing to allow the water to run off onto the allotment site (via guttering) and into a large tank such as an IBC (meter cubed container). In general water storage containers should be as large as possible so that as much of the winter rains can be collected and stored.

Other considerations applicable to sites on slopes are the use of swales (ridges and ditches running along contours) which stop runoff and divert water downwards into subsoil where it is available for longer periods throughout a dry-spell. The ridges can be planted up with thirsty plants to benefit from the water availability.

Recommendation 6

That the Strategic Director Regeneration arranges for each site to be examined with a view to establishing, where possible, a large-scale communal water self-sufficiency scheme. Where this is not possible, the Allotments Service should publicise the scope for individual plots to harvest rainwater and facilitate this by seeking to bulk-buy and then sell on requisite materials

Grass Roots Democracy

Grass Roots Democracy – encouraging the development of self-help groups towards self-sufficiency and self-management.

Self management of sites can only happen where there is an active allotment society (or association) with sufficient capacity, and motivation. A step-wise approach would seem most likely to ease sites into devolved management.

The first step that should be taken is more encouragement and support for societies to be set up on each site. A Society-Pack is available with template constitution and tick box action plan for prospective society committees to follow.

Once a site society is established and has shown a track record, they would be in a position to consider devolved management. For this to work there is an increased requirement for the society to have

1. A secure financial base - encourage societies to run a shop or market stall, where appropriate, which could raise funds.
2. Management skills – provide training workshops, or refer to other training providers such as those in the voluntary sector.
3. Access to specialist knowledge - the Allotment Regeneration Initiative (ARI) offers mentoring by other successful societies and utilise links with mentor scheme.

The capacity of an allotment society or association to make a success of devolved management will depend in part on:-

- the extent of the duties to be devolved,
- the level of ongoing support that can be provided by the Authority

"Best practice" requires that all sites be managed according to the model that affords the highest level of autonomy that can be sustained by the plot holders on each site, and that the local authority, in identifying the appropriate model for each site, exercises a duty of care.

ARI has a lot of useful information and factsheets; in particular *Gardeners in Charge* (available at <http://www.farmgarden.org.uk/ari/documents/gardenersincharge.pdf>) outlines potential stages of devolved management, beginning with dependence (allotment authority in sole management), through to Participation, Delegation, Semi-Autonomy, and finally Autonomy (allotment association in sole management).

It is important that allotment societies ensure they are covered for any liability and take out appropriate insurances. It might be worth looking into whether block policies could be taken out in partnership with the authority. Likewise, devolved management leases should include rescue strategies in the event something goes wrong.

“the best allotment societies often play an active role in the wider community. This may be through involvement in Local Agenda 21 initiatives, community composting or annual festivals. [...] The allotments officer should play an enabling role, linking allotment societies with the various organisations responsible for people who could benefit from the educational or therapeutic benefits of tending a plot”

<http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm199798/cmselect/cmenvtra/560/56011.htm>

Recommendation 7

That the Strategic Director Regeneration seeks, wherever possible, to encourage and support the establishment and development of self management groups whilst acknowledging that there may be differing degrees of capacity for exercising autonomy.

The Council's role

It is considered that the Allotments Service would benefit from producing and adopting a mission statement. Thereafter, reflective practice would mean that the service would judge its own performance in living up to its mission statement.

Given the acknowledged value of the allotment movement and the contribution allotments make to meeting corporate priorities, there is a very clear case for driving allotments up the political agenda and winning over elected members and senior officers to support the movement.

Councillors and officers might wish to consider a differentiated service being provided by the Council with relatively more Council resources being allocated to the inner city allotments at a lower rental. At the same time allotment rentals might be higher in the outer district, albeit attracting a lower level of resource support. This would be one way of using the market mechanism to deal with a situation of excess demand for allotments in the outer district and excess supply on the inner. As a broad generalisation, the outer district has shown more capacity for self-management.

The current allotments legislation is outdated, it stifles much positive action, and it desperately needs simplifying, updating and enhancing. The Working Group felt that the Council should join other local authorities (such as Birmingham City Council) in calling for an overhaul of the outdated allotments legislation under the Sustainable Communities Act.

Recommendation 8

That the Strategic Director Regeneration contacts and works with the relevant officers in other like-minded authorities (e.g. Birmingham) with a view to bringing about, with support from elected members, amendment to current national legislation on allotments, including the sale of produce.

Examples of Good Practice – Case Studies

All the allotment holder representatives on the Working Group were invited to submit examples of good practice to include in the report.

Bradford Community Environment Project's allotments open day

July brings Bradford Community Environment Project's annual open day on their allotments on Scotchman Road, Manningham - very much an inner city area of Bradford, not normally associated with growing food and enjoying nature.

BCEP is a locally-based environmental charity which promotes food growing and healthy eating as part of its NHS-funded *Grow Organic* programmes. Since 1999, the organisation has assisted children and community groups to grow their own food on this site. The open day is an opportunity to bring together many of BCEP's client groups from across the city to celebrate and reap the fruits (and vegetables!) of their labour together.

In 2009, 250 children and 30 adults attended, all of them enjoying the wide range of activities provided by BCEP's various educational and play programmes (see www.bcep.org.uk for details) and their partners (Artworks and Kala Sangam).

The yurt was erected, the outdoor kitchen set up, and everything was in place to make it a special celebration. Children who are regular growers in BCEP's Grow Organic programme came this year from 8 different settings, including from Manningham, Girdlington, Shipley and Undercliffe.

The atmosphere was fantastic, with children enjoying weeding, harvesting (potatoes, courgettes, peas, salad leaves and flowers, red and black currants, strawberries, raspberries), planting, a minibeast hunt, reading books and stories, games like wild bird bingo, cooking and eating the freshly harvested produce (vegetable omelettes, salad, fruit compote), making wands from twigs and other art/craft activities, scrap play - and even music. The adults thrived on the buzz, and also took the opportunity to find out more about growing, composting, and the joys of growing your own.

BCEP's experienced cook and eat facilitator couldn't believe the popularity of the freshly harvested vegetables and fruit: 'I can't believe how much those children ate', she exclaimed. That just goes to show how important it is for people to grow their own.



Northcliffe Allotment Society

Last year the society undertook a major project – establishing a new clubhouse. This project involved obtaining funding from various sources.

The cost of the base was covered by a £500 grant from the Community Chest with £700 match funding from our own account. The main building, installation of electricity,

insulation etc was funded by the Ward Investment Fund. The Grassroots fund through Cnet provided the funding for the security shutters and internal furniture. We are presently looking for funding to give disability access.

The purpose of this building is not only to provide a clubhouse for the Allotment Society but hopefully will be used as a meeting place for other associated groups i.e. Friends of Northcliffe and for children from local schools on nature walks, using this as an information centre. We hope to expand on this usage.

The society also has a central tool store. The cost of the container came from the Society's own funds, but was provided by a local firm as a charity gift and cost us only £100 plus VAT!

The tools in the container are all expensive ones which tenants will use only two or three times a year so it would not be cost effective for them to buy their own. We hire these out at £4 a time to cover the cost of maintenance and fuel. This has been a great success. The cost of the tools has been funded through a variety of sources.

We are presently erecting new fencing and hedging to the plot and will then plant some ornamental, prickly shrubs to provide more security and make the container less visible and more in keeping with the ethos of the area.



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