

REPORT TO: SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 14 MARCH 2023

TITLE: ALLOTMENT REVIEW

LEAD OFFICER: JANE GREER, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENT (01279) 446406

RECOMMENDED that:

- A** The Council promote opportunities to work with suitable community groups to develop alternative compatible uses for unpopular allotment sites whilst retaining availability of traditional allotment lettings as described in Proposals in the report below.

BACKGROUND

1. Access to allotments has long been recognised as valuable, giving the opportunity to grow fruit, vegetables, and flowers. Increasingly in recent years the importance of working outdoors in the fresh air for wellbeing has been recognised, while the cost-of-living crisis has brought growing healthy low-cost food into renewed focus. Allotments additionally form part of the much-appreciated green infrastructure of the town and can contribute to its biodiversity.
2. The Allotments Acts of 1908, 1922 and 1950 set out the functions of Parish and District Councils in terms of the provision of allotments and defined the Allotments Authority. Any allotments provided under the Allotments Acts are referred to as Statutory Allotments.
3. In general, the Allotments Acts give the role of Allotments Authority to both the District Council and the Parish Council. However, Harlow as a District is not parished therefore the powers, duties and responsibilities of the Allotment Authority lie with the Council.
4. The Allotments Acts require the Allotments Authority to provide a sufficient number of allotments to meet demand. The Authority is required to have regard to duly made representations from six or more residents as to sufficiency. The land provided should be suitable for growing purposes, but in other respects authorities have discretion regarding the nature and quality of provision.
5. Non-statutory allotments may be provided: under the Local Government Act 1972 local authorities were empowered to purchase land in advance of need for other functions. Such land could be used for other temporary purposes such as allotments in the meantime, the plots being let under a lease or a licence, outside the provisions of the Allotments Acts. The Council however considers all allotment plots currently available in the district to be statutory allotments.

ISSUES/PROPOSALS

Current Provision and Demand

6. The Council provides 33 allotment sites, surrounded by hedges or fencing and supplied with mains water. Historically the Council entered into an agreement with Harlow Allotment Association (HAA) for the self-management of sites by plot holders themselves where a site representative could be appointed.
7. The Site Representative role is not without responsibility, however, and it was not possible to identify a site representative in all cases. A number of sites thus remained under Council management. The Allotment Association currently self-manage 15 sites, while the Council is responsible for the remaining 18.
8. Allotment sites are set out in Appendix 1 to the report. There is a good geographical spread of allotment sites across the district, although travel distance from residents' homes to the nearest site varies.
9. Consultation with HAA and experience of letting Council managed sites suggests good demand for sites that have good plot occupation and a thriving community of allotment holders. Conversely, there are some sites that are currently untenanted, and where there is no apparent demand for plots. This does not appear to be due to the location or facilities on the individual sites, so much as a blighting effect of many vacant and hence unworked plots.

Maintenance and Management of Sites

10. Responsibility for managing the letting of plots and day to day repairs at allotment sites lies with the Allotment Association on self-managed sites; and with HTS (Property and Environment) Ltd [HTS] on Council-managed sites.
11. HTS have no dedicated allotment management capacity but manage plot letting and day to day repairs through their landscape management team. HAA effectively relies on the voluntary effort of its members although plot letting fees are available to support minor expenses such as purchase of materials for repairs.
12. Recently sites which had previously been managed by HAA have returned to Council management as they have experienced reduced demand from plot holders and reduced capacity. HTS have not been able to identify additional capacity to manage such sites. The Council has no dedicated resource to manage allotments although where necessary officers from the Landscape and Biodiversity team do step in.
13. Where more extensive repairs or renewals such as replacement gates, fencing, or water supply arrangements have been required whether at HAA or Council-managed sites, this has been achieved by bids to the capital programme managed by Council Landscape and Biodiversity staff.

14. While increasing the Council resources devoted to allotment management and maintenance would no doubt go no small way to encourage better use of vacant allotment space, the considerable budget pressures faced by the Council must be acknowledged: substantial funding increases from Council sources are unlikely to be forthcoming in the near future.

Revitalising Less Popular Allotments

15. It is considered likely that an overgrown plot in an unloved site will not be attractive to new tenants. Allotment gardening can be a lot of work and on an unloved site this can be a daunting and lonely prospect. Where allotments sites are less attractive due to low occupancy it may be argued that alternative uses might be found for the land.
16. As stated above, the intrinsic value of allotments is recognised by the Council; further, allotments are considered to enjoy statutory protection under the allotment acts. There are uses that would be compatible with letting plots as allotments in the traditional way, and where such uses would contribute to vitality and community-building on an unpopular site. There is clearly a strong case for the Council to consider and where appropriate encourage such uses.
17. There has been growth recently in compatible activity taking place on allotments, such as community allotment gardening, where a number of plots individual plots are worked in common, often by to people who are not in a position to take on a plot of their own, or not yet ready, including people with a wide range of disabilities, people from socially excluded groups, participants in 'green gyms' and novice gardeners.
18. Locally the Council has good experience of working with "Plant Pots and Wellies", community initiative that supports both children and adults with additional needs in providing opportunities for horticultural and outdoor therapy based on one of the Council's allotment sites.
19. Recently the Council has been working with local charitable interests on using allotment land for voluntary food production to supplement the diets of residents struggling to cope in the current cost of living crisis. This has attracted interest in the national media and external support offered under corporate social responsibility. Devoting part of a vacant site to such activity, while retaining plots for rent in the traditional way, managed by a not for profit community organisation, promises the prospect of an alternative self-management model: a revitalised site, attracting tenants to the plots for rent; providing income to support the site's maintenance, growing fresh food for those who need it, providing healthy volunteering opportunities, and attracting external support not available to the Council.

Proposals

20. It is proposed that the Council continue in its relationship with HTS and HAA but seek opportunities to work with not for profit and community-based organisations on directly managed sites that have no tenants or high vacancy rates.

21. Suitable occupation arrangements would need to be devised so that the future use of sites as allotments is safeguarded, without creating an overly burdensome or excessively costly approach that might discourage community organisations.
22. The Council would then promote opportunities to work in cooperation with potential partners to develop individual schemes on suitable sites.

IMPLICATIONS

Strategic Growth and Regeneration

As set out in the report

Author: James Gardner, Assistant Director Regeneration

Finance

As set out in the report

Author: Simon Freeman, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance

Housing

As set out in the report.

Author: Andrew Murray, Director of Housing

Communities and Environment

As set out in the report.

Author: Jane Greer, Director of Communities and Environment

Governance and Corporate Services

The statutory basis for provision of allotments is contained within the report.

Author: Simon Hill, Director of Governance and Corporate Services

Appendices

Appendix A - Location of sites and management responsibility

Background Papers

None

Glossary of terms/abbreviations used

HTS - HTS (Property and Environment) Ltd.

HAA - Harlow Allotment Association

Council Owned Allotments

Allotment site	Management Organisation
Arkwrights	Harlow Council
Ash Tree Field	Harlow Allotment Association
Brays Mead	Harlow Allotment Association
Cannons Brook	Harlow Council
Canons Gate	Harlow Council
Chippingfield	Harlow Council
Commonfields	Harlow Allotment Association
Dashes No.2	Harlow Council
Dudley Terrace	Harlow Council
Felmongers	Harlow Council
First Avenue	Harlow Allotment Association
Fold Croft	Harlow Allotment Association
Fullers Mead	Harlow Council
Glebelands	Harlow Council
Honey Hill	Harlow Allotment Association
Izzards	Harlow Allotment Association
Linford End	Harlow Allotment Association
Long Ley	Harlow Council
Mill Lane	Harlow Allotment Association
Netteswell Common	Harlow Allotment Association
Nicholls Field	Harlow Council
Ram Gorse	Harlow Allotment Association
Rundells	Harlow Allotment Association
Rushes Mead	Harlow Council
Stackfield	Harlow Council
Stile Croft 1	Harlow Council
Stile Croft 2	Harlow Council
Silvesters	Harlow Allotment Association
Tanys Dell	Harlow Council
Upper Stoneyfield	Harlow Allotment Association
Vicarage Wood	Harlow Council
Water Lane	Harlow Allotment Association
Willowfield	Harlow Council