

**ENVIRONMENT AND ATTRACTIVE CITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE  
15 MARCH 2010**

**ALLOTMENTS PROVISION IN SUNDERLAND TASK AND FINISH GROUP  
FINAL REPORT**

**Report of the Allotments Provision Task and Finish Group**

**STRATEGIC PRIORITIES: SP5: Attractive and Inclusive City  
CORPORATE PRIORITIES: CIO1: Delivering Customer Focused Services,  
CIO4: Improving Partnership Working to Deliver 'One City'.**

**1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 To receive the draft final report on the work of the Committee's Task and Finish Group on allotment provision in Sunderland.

**2 Introduction**

- 2.1. The Environment and Attractive City Scrutiny Committee, at its meeting on 18 June 2009, agreed that a Task and Finish Group be established to undertake an investigation into allotment provision in Sunderland.
- 2.2. The Scrutiny Committee also agreed for the Task and Finish Group to establish its own terms of reference and to report back to the Environment and Attractive City Scrutiny Committee as appropriate.
- 2.3. The Task and Finish Group's working method for this piece of work was seen to have the advantage of:
- (a) Progressing the investigation more quickly and outside of the confines of the Committee's formal meetings; and
  - (b) Allowing for greater investigation of the issue by Members.

**3. Aim of the Task and Finish Working Group**

- 3.1. The overall aim of the scrutiny review was to explore Sunderland City Council's approach to allotment provision within the City.

#### **4. Terms of Reference**

4.1. The agreed terms of reference for the review were:-

- (a) To examine the current criteria, take up and process of renting an Allotment plot within Sunderland;
- (b) To examine financial resources, rental income arrangements and support available to the provision of allotments;
- (c) To examine the maintenance provision for Allotments; and
- (d) To examine the role allotments play in meeting the national agenda, with a particular focus on community cohesion and healthy living.

#### **5. Membership of the Task and Finish Working Group**

5.1. The membership of the Group consisted of Councillors Wakefield (Chair), Howe, Kelly and Stephenson.

#### **6. Methods of Investigation**

6.1. The following methods of investigation were used for the review:

- (a) Desktop research (including consideration of best practice);
- (b) Site Visit to Allotment Sites in Sunderland;
- (c) An Audit of current Allotment Provision in Sunderland;
- (d) Evidence from the City Council's Officers; and
- (e) Evidence from Allotment Users in Sunderland.

#### **7. Setting the Scene**

##### *Legislative Framework and the National Agenda for Allotments*

7.1 An allotment plot is a piece of land, usually referred to as a plot, around 250 square metres in size, which can be rented for cultivation, i.e. for the use of growing flowers, fruit and vegetables.

- 7.2 The demand for allotments peaks and troughs on a cyclical basis. Currently there is a marked increase in demand for allotment plots, not seen since the 1970s. It is thought the increased awareness of the need for a healthy lifestyle has contributed to this significantly as more people use gardening as a way of keeping fit as well as cultivating their own supply of organic fruit and vegetables.
- 7.3 The economic downturn has also contributed to the rise in the popularity of allotments, as people look to produce their own food cheaply. Recently there has been increased media interest in the changing age demographic of allotment holders. Traditionally a past time for the semi-retired or retired, it is acknowledged that more young people are applying for and taking on allotment plots.
- 7.4 Television programmes such as Gardeners World, Jamie at Home and Riverview Cottage promote the 'grow your own' and self sufficiency ethos.
- 7.5 The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) is responsible for policy on allotments at a national level. The aim of government is to promote allotments, provide protection for allotment holders and ensure that there is sufficient provision to meet demand.
- 7.6 It is recognised that allotments play an important role in communities and contributes to a healthy diet and exercise; a source of growing food cheaply and organically and the development of social activity, thus adding to the community cohesion agenda.
- 7.7 There are several pieces of legislation relating to allotments;
- (a) The **Small Holdings and Allotment Act 1908** – Placed a duty on authorities to provide sufficient allotments due to demand. It also made it possible for local authorities to purchase land compulsorily in order to provide allotments.
  - (b) The **Allotments Act 1922** – Provided allotment holders with security of tenure and greater compensation should their tenancy be terminated. It also specified that plots should be mostly cultivated and used for growing sources of food.
  - (c) The **Allotments Act 1925** – Established the need for local authorities to incorporate allotment provision into town planning.
  - (d) The **Allotments Act 1950** – Made changes to rental charges and further increased security for allotment holders by introducing a

minimum period of notice to quit of 12 months and compensation payable to allotment holders should the land be used for other purposes by local authorities.

- 7.8 Other legislation which impacts upon the provision of allotments is the **Local Government Act 1972**, which amended various detailed contained within previous allotments legislation and in regards to planning, the **Town and Country Planning Act 1990**, the **Acquisition of Land Act 1981** and the **Local Government Planning and Land Act 1980**.

## 8. Findings of the Task and Finish Group

### *Provision and Condition of Allotments in Sunderland*

- 8.1 The Task and Finish Group found there are 92 allotment sites in Sunderland, owned by Sunderland City Council, with a total 2773 plots. The size of allotment sites ranges from 1 – 340 plots. The table below provides further detail:

<b>Area</b>	<b>No. of Sites</b>	<b>Excellent - Good</b>	<b>Adequate</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Total Plots</b>
<b>Coalfields</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>779</b>
Copt Hill	-	-	-	-	128
Hetton	-	-	-	-	252
Houghton	-	-	-	-	178
Shiney Row	-	-	-	-	221
<b>North</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>753</b>
Castle	-	-	-	-	0
Fulwell	-	-	-	-	350
Redhill	-	-	-	-	238
Southwick	-	-	-	-	164
St. Peter's	-	-	-	-	1
<b>East</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>441</b>
Doxford	-	-	-	-	271
Hendon	-	-	-	-	85
Millfield	-	-	-	-	19
Ryhope	-	-	-	-	66
St. Michael's	-	-	-	-	0
<b>Washington</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>339</b>
Washington Central	-	-	-	-	55
Washington East	-	-	-	-	99
Washington North	-	-	-	-	143
Washington South	-	-	-	-	42

Washington West	-	-	-	-	0
<b>West</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>461</b>
Barnes	-	-	-	-	119
Pallion	-	-	-	-	59
Sandhill	-	-	-	-	0
Silksworth	-	-	-	-	226
St. Anne's	-	-	-	-	57
St. Chad's	-	-	-	-	0
<b>Total:</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2773</b>

Table 1: Breakdown of Allotment Provision per Area

8.2 Guidance from the Allotment Regeneration Initiative states that local authorities should aim to provide 15 allotment plots per 1000 households. The Task and Finish Group established that when these guidelines are applied in Sunderland, overall there is good allotment provision. Suggested provision for the City is 1,859 plots, whilst actual provision is 2773.

8.3 The geographical spread of allotments is good (**Appendix 1**), however there is an over supply of allotment plots in some areas of the City. The Coalfields area, for example, has more than double the suggested plot provision. This appears to be due to the purchase of allotment sites from the National Coal Board by the Local Authority. In other areas provision appears to be balanced however there are a total of five wards within the North, West and East areas of the City that have no allotment provision at all.

### Allotments Audit

8.4 As part of the study, the Group requested an audit of the condition of every allotment site across the city (**Appendix 2**). This was conducted during January/February 2010 and has proved an invaluable contribution to the scrutiny investigation. Each allotment site was assessed against a scoring matrix developed by officers. The matrix took account of access, water, perimeter fence, internal pathways and parking. Points were allocated based on whether provision for each category was excellent, good, adequate, poor or very poor. The maximum score was 30 points. The Audit showed that allotment sites across the City range in condition, from good to excellent (31 sites) and adequate (55 sites), through to poor (6 sites). The majority of sites are in an adequate condition. Of the five areas of the City, only two areas are deemed to contain poor sites, in the East (1 site) and Coalfields (5 sites).

8.5 The Washington area of the City contains the most sites deemed to be good to excellent; possibly due to Washington being a relatively new area

- where more consistent planning has been applied to allotment site development.
- 8.6 On the sites assessed as poor, there are often issues with allotment holders using plots to keep livestock, such as horses. All new tenancy agreements stipulate that allotment plots should not be used to keep livestock, with the exception of hens and rabbits, however many tenants held existing agreements. In addition to this, there are issues of fly tipping; anti-social behaviour and criminal activity. Where the Local Authority is informed of such problems, detailed procedures are in place to instigate eviction proceedings. The Allotments Officer regularly works with the Police and other agencies to evict tenants and deal with issues where criminal activity is suspected.
  - 8.7 Of the 2773 plots in Sunderland approximately 4% are in a condition which means they cannot be let and 6% are short term vacant.
  - 8.8 The waiting list for allotment plots stood at 1609 in December 2009, however, the actual number of applicants is around 800, each applicant giving a first and second choice of allotment sites. Waiting lists are higher for the better sites in the City, whilst demand is low for poorer sites, which is often where vacant plots are located. It is estimated that applicants can expect to wait approximately 4 years and 3 months for an allotment, however this is extremely difficult to predict due to tenancy agreements being life-long unless an allotment holder either chooses to give up their plot or they are evicted. Applicants on the waiting list are mostly unwilling to take on those plots that are deemed to be unlettable, due to the amount of work involved in bringing the plot to a usable standard.
  - 8.9 Due to the cyclical nature of the demand for allotments, and the fact that provision in Sunderland is already good, the Task and Finish Group found there was a need to focus on bringing existing sites to a consistent standard in the first instance rather than developing new sites. This will ensure that if demand reduces in the future the Local Authority are not left with high numbers of vacant plots.

### ***Visits To Allotments***

- 8.10 As part of its study, the Task and Finish Working Group visited a number of sites within the city to view examples of the best and less satisfactory sites. The Group found strong evidence of informal but also locally coordinated community activity on allotment sites including community gardens utilised by organisations such as Age Concern, and the Oxclose Multi-Purpose Centre, a services for people with disabilities.

**Ayton Site in Washington – An Example of Good Practice.**

*Although this site is directly managed by the Council, allotment holders, particularly the Allotment Secretary, play an active role in developing the site, by applying for funding to have proper pathways and fencing. The site played an active role in the community, for example there was a community garden being developed for use by Age Concern, as well as an allotment used by the Oxclose Multi-Purpose Centre, a centre for people with disabilities. The allotment holders have developed 'Growing Clubs' with four local schools; St Joseph's; St John Boste; Lambton Primary and Glebe Wessington School. In addition to visiting these schools to offer advice and practical support to promote the growing of organic vegetables, the site was successful last year in bidding for funding to obtain a cabin for use as a classroom. School children are invited onto the site and are given practical demonstrations on all aspects of growing vegetables, from seed sowing to planting and looking after crops.*

- 8.11 The Growing Clubs developed by the Ayton site in Washington were found to be well co-ordinated approaches to involving and educating local school children by bringing them onto the site to learn about planting and caring for crops. These approaches however are not wide spread across the City and are dependant upon the initiative of individual allotment holders and allotment committees rather than being coordinated by the Council.
- 8.12 There are five leased sites and nine self-managed sites. The results of the Allotment Audit demonstrated that the majority of these sites were of good to excellent standard. The Group found that self-managed and leased sites are thought to hold many advantages for allotment holders such as; promoting and developing small communities of people with a common interest; better awareness of the issues faced within the individual allotment sites and also a point of contact for allotment holders to raise issues. Self-managed and leased sites also appear to be successful in accessing funding.
- 8.13 The self management of sites can provide people with a greater sense of ownership. However, there has been limited public interest in the development of self-managed and leased sites within the City. The Task and Finish Group have learned this may be due to a lack of confidence in allotment holders that they have the appropriate skills to take on the responsibility of a self-managed or leased site. There is currently no skills development for allotment holders and no opportunity for allotments holders to share issues and good practice. The Group also found that whilst some allotment associations want more autonomy in the

management of sites, others rely on the support given to them by the Local Authority.

***Britannia Terrace Fence Houses – An example of an unsatisfactory site***

*An ex National Coal Board (NCB), which came into the Local Authority's possession. The site is large and has no proper walkways or roads to negotiate between the allotments. Plot layout for the site is inconsistent. There are issues of people keeping live stock. All new tenancy agreements stipulate the prohibition of using allotments for live stock except hens and rabbits, however many allotment holders held existing tenancy agreements. Fly tipping and litter are also issues faced at the site as well as anti-social behaviour and criminal activity. A number of the plots have high fencing, meaning the plot cannot be viewed. All of these factors make the effective management of the site very difficult. There is a staged process in place to evict those tenants who are not using the allotment for the stipulated purpose, however this can be lengthy. The Allotments Officer also works with the Police and other agencies to evict people and deal with issues where there is suspected criminal activity.*

- 8.14 Self-managed and leased sites retain 25% and 50% of the rental income generated for the site in recompense for the collection of rents and other matters dealt with by the Allotment Committee.
- 8.15 The Allotments Officer has good relationships with site contacts and, for those that have them, site Secretaries and a meeting is held twice a year to discuss issues and any updates.

***Shields Road, Newcastle Road – An example of Good Practice.***

*This site was considered to be a success story for the City. At 340 plots, it is one of the largest sites in the country and was recently taken over as a self-managed site by a newly formed Allotment Committee. The Committee meet monthly and keep in contact with allotment holders through the production of a newsletter which is sent out via email. They have created an improvements list with associated costs and will use this to apply for funding through Community Chest. The Chair of the Group was shown some of the most improved areas of the site, as well as the areas still needed to be improved and were informed about issues allotment holders faced, such as vandalism and theft. The Chair of the Group was advised that the Allotment Committee saw many advantages to being a self-managed site as it allowed for more close management and developed a community feel to the site. The Committee have developed their own rules, supported by the Council, which tenants have to agree to before they take a plot. They appreciated the support of the Allotments Officer as they felt they were not capable of resolving some issues, for example, legal issues.*



### ***Support, Rental Income and Financial Resources***

- 8.16 Sunderland currently employs one Allotments Officer who is responsible for 94 sites across the City. There is limited capacity to manage the directly managed sites and offer support to those sites that would like, or could be encouraged to become self-managed or leased.
- 8.17 The Task and Finish Group found that the revenue generated from the collection of rents for allotments was received directly by the Treasurer and the allotments service was allocated a yearly improvement budget of £32,890. To develop new plots and improve existing plots would cost approximately £3,500 per plot, highlighting the shortfall of the existing improvements budget.
- 8.18 The Task and Finish Group found that Sunderland's rental charges are lower most neighbouring authorities. In a report to the Culture and Leisure Review Committee on 16<sup>th</sup> September 2008, the following information was given with regard to the allotment charges for neighbouring local authorities for 2008/2009:

<b>Local Authority</b>	<b>Type/Size of Plot</b>	<b>Charge</b>	<b>Sunderland's Comparative Charge (as at 2008)</b>
Newcastle City Council	Individual Plots (per 250 sqm)	£37.51	£28.18
South Tyneside Council	Medium (226-250 sqm)	£71.90	£28.18
Middlesbrough Council	Standard plot (252 sqm)	£31.00	£28.18
Gateshead Council	Medium (up to 300sqm)	£26.50	£28.18

Table 2: Allotment Charges for Neighbouring Authorities 2008/2009)

- 8.19 Traditionally the rental charges for allotments have been low in order to maintain accessibility for all, however, Sunderland City Council's rental charges are substantially lower than neighbouring authorities. If rental charges were raised slightly they would still be low comparatively.

## **9. Conclusions**

- 9.1 The Task and Finish Working Group concluded:-

- (a) That it should be recognised the benefits allotments can bring to the community, the environment and the healthy eating agenda;
- (b) That there is a statutory duty to ensure the provision of allotments in the City under the Small Holdings and Allotments Act (1908);
- (c) That the Allotment provision in Sunderland is good, and more plots are available per population than is prescribed in guidance, however, some areas are better provided for than others;
- (d) That there are a relatively low number of poor allotment sites in the City, although these appear to be mainly concentrated in one area of the City;
- (e) That self-managed and leased sites are generally better maintained and are preferable to directly managed. The development of skills may play a role in encouraging allotment holders to form allotment committees and become self-managed or leased;
- (f) That the focus for the City should be to bring existing sites to a consistent standard rather than seek to develop new plots;
- (g) That the provision of the Allotments Service may be improved by examining the role that Area Committees have in the provision, management and funding of allotment sites in their areas. This could be explored by including allotments within the scope of the Responsive Local Services programme at the appropriate time;
- (h) That Allotments should be financially accessible to residents of the City, and there is no doubt the rent should reflect this, however a small increase of rental charges would generate the revenue needed to make some of the improvements to allotments if it were ring fenced to the service; and
- (i) That financial resourcing is a considerable issue and in recognition of the current financial climate, an innovative approach should be taken to ensure the funding available to the Allotments Service is adequate.
- (j) That it is important not to lose the momentum and to ensure the report drives future improvement to allotment provision.

## **10. Recommendations**

10.1 The Environment and Attractive City Scrutiny Committee's Task and Finish Group has taken evidence from a variety of sources to assist in the formulation of a balanced range of recommendations. The Group's key recommendations to the Cabinet are as outlined below:-

- (a) That a rolling programme be established to bring the City Council's existing Allotment Sites up to an acceptable and consistent standard;
- (b) That the practicalities of raising revenue through the land sale of under utilised Allotment sites, where appropriate, be further explored;
- (c) That consideration be given to rationalising the existing waiting list along with the introduction of a points system to prioritise future allotment applications;
- (d) That in order to bring the City Council's yearly rental charges for Allotments in line with those of neighbouring local authorities, a small increase be made to the yearly rental charge for 2010/11 which is ring fenced to the service for re-investment;
- (e) That the City Council encourages the take-up of self-managed and leased sites and provides appropriate training and support to interested parties;
- (f) That consideration be given to the positive contributions that City Council's Area Committees could play in the sourcing and allocation of resources for allotments across the city; and
- (g) That the City Council's current Allotments Strategy be reviewed and revised accordingly and incorporates recommendations (a) to (f) above.

## **11. Acknowledgements**

11.1 The Group is grateful to all those who have presented evidence during the course of our review. We would like to place on record our appreciation, in particular of the willingness and co-operation we have received from the below named:-

Les Clark, Head of Street Scene, Sunderland City Council

Peter High, Project Director – Strategic Waste, Sunderland City Council

Ian Coburn, Parks Development Officer, Sunderland City Council

Ethel Wilson, Allotments Officer, Sunderland City Council

Tim Wright, Red Machine Allotment Site

Mike Havelock, Ian Hornsey, Kenny Turnbull, Chris Howe and Peter Nicholson from the Shields Road Allotment Committee

## **12. Background Papers**

12.1 The following background papers were consulted or referred to in the preparation of this report:

- (a) DCLG's 'Allotments – A Plot Holders Guide' 2007 (Revised Edition)
- (b) Allotment Regeneration Initiative 'Growing in the Community'

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