

Overview and Scrutiny Task Group - Allotments

Tuesday, 9 November 2010

Present: Councillor Julia Berry (Chair) and Councillors Anthony Gee, Alison Hansford, Harold Heaton and June Molyneux

Also in attendance: Councillors Martin Walls (Head of Streetscene), Dianne Scambler (Democratic and Member Services Officer) and Andy Brown (Parks and Open Spaces Officer (Development))

10.A.21 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Marie Gray.

10.A.22 DECLARATIONS OF ANY INTERESTS

No declarations of interest were declared.

10.A.23 MINUTES

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group meeting held on 11 October 2010 be held as a correct record for signing by the Chair.

10.A.24 COLLECTION AND CONSIDERATION OF EVIDENCE

The Group received for consideration the consultation response of the Chorley and South Ribble Disability Forum on the provision of allotments.

The Forum made the following points:

- People often did not apply for allotments because of the huge waiting lists.
- They felt that some groups were disadvantaged because of the difficulties they experienced in accessing information about the allotments or tenancy agreements. This applied to people with visual impairments, BSL users and those who have learning difficulties.
- Information should be more readily available about charges. There was some concern that there was different charges for similar sized plots but no explanation as to why.
- The overall layout and access to allotments is crucial for disabled people. Wheelchair users and people with visual impairments need accessible parking close to the site, with level, smooth, unobstructed pathways and raised beds.
- The formation of User Groups for consultation purposes.

RESOLVED – That the points made be noted and taken into account when considering the management and maintenance of allotments within Chorley.

10.A.25 ALLOTMENTS MANAGEMENT AND MAINTENANCE REPORT

The Group received a report of the Head of Streetscene Services that summarised the areas for review with regards to the management and maintenance of allotments within Chorley.

The report highlighted the current position on each issue and some suggestions of areas to explore.

Members were asked to consider these issues in light of the information they had gathered to date, on site visits; from other officers; and from the representatives who had expressed a view.

Standard Charges

The current charge for an allotment is £39.50 per year with a 50% reduction for old aged pensioners. This generates an income of around £6000 and does not currently cover the costs of administration and management of the allotments, which includes on site fresh water supply on two of the sites.

Members agreed that the existing annual rental charges need to be reviewed. Some consideration was given to the differing sizes of plots and whether or not this should be reflective of the cost.

Recommendations:

1. **That the annual charge of £39.50 increases in line with inflation.**
2. **That the concessionary rate be phased out over the next two years. 75% of rental will be charged in 2011/12 with the full rental being charged in 2012/13**
3. **That the annual charge be regardless of plot size.**
4. **That it be Council policy to carve up the larger plots as and when they become available.**

Layout of New Sites:

The last site developed in Chorley had no restrictions on what could be allowed on the plots in terms of shed and fences etc. This has led to a fairly informal arrangement where the plot holders have an open rein to erect what they want. This can lead to sites looking rather untidy as the types of sheds and fences are never uniform.

Although it was agreed that by imposing some restrictions, the sites would look a lot tidier and be easier to maintain, there was also a view that the plot holders should be allowed to recycle materials if able in order to drive through the sustainability agenda. This view had been strongly expressed by allotment holders at the last meeting.

It was felt that the plot holder could define their own boundaries using suitable materials and could erect suitable structures for storage/cultivation, subject to consent, and a defined maximum floor space (to be determined).

If the allotment holder used any materials that the Council considered to be unsafe or hazardous they would be asked to remove them from the plot and this standard should be enforceable through the Tenancy Agreement.

Members were also keen to minimise further costs to the plot holder, particularly bearing in mind that the decision to increase rental costs would impact on a number of tenants.

Recommendations:

1. **That the Council provide suitable perimeter fencing on all its new sites, that will be adequately maintained.**
2. **That the allotment holder be responsible for defining the actual plot, using safe and suitable materials.**
3. **That the subject to consent, the allotment holder be responsible for erecting structures on the plot for the purposes of storage/cultivation using safe and suitable materials with a total floor space (to be determined)**

4. That the new Tenancy Agreement be implemented for all new sites and when an allotment is taken up by a new holder.

Provision of services (Water)

Currently two of the sites have clean piped water on site. This is not controlled and subject to abuse. In addition the high cost of supply impacts on the overall running costs of the service. On newer sites the provision of butts to encourage plot holders to take a more sustainable approach has had a mixed response, the scheme is a considerable cost to the Council and the allotment holders deem them to be too small in size.

Officers advised Members that the cost of installing clean piped water to the remainder of its sites, would generate high costs and it was accepted that this was not a feasible option in the current financial climate.

It was however recognised that although the present water provision should remain, this needed to be cost neutral to the Council and Members considered charging the allotment holders for this amenity. This view had also received support from the allotment holders at the last meeting and there seemed to be an expectation that tenants would be prepared to pay more for the level of amenity they received.

Members considered implementing a new water provision charge in 2012/13. Allotment holders would be notified in April 2011 that the charges would be based on the water usage on site in 2011/12, this would also allow time for any further views and feedback and it was hoped that this would encourage the allotment holders to take a more sustainable approach and promote good housekeeping and self management on site. With this in mind Members asked officers to provide information on the current costs to the Council for the provision of this water.

Members also discussed ceasing the provision of water butts. Instead new allotment holders would receive help and guidance on the sustainability agenda, advice on suitable water collection methods and contact details for suppliers.

Recommendations:

- 1. That the present water provision is maintained on the two sites but at cost neutral to the Council.**
- 2. That the allotment holders be charged for the water provision based on the usage of the previous rental year.**
- 3. That the provision of water butts to new allotment holders be withdrawn.**
- 4. That information help and guidance be provided to new allotment holders on the sustainability agenda.**

Waiting List Management

At the start of the review there were around 400 people on the waiting list. However there was no fixed procedure in place to determine its accuracy and at an earlier meeting Members were of the opinion that the onus was on the individual to inform the Council yearly of their intention to remain on the list. This instruction had been communicated to all the existing people on the list and had resulted in the removal of over 100 applicants and a reduction of administration costs.

The waiting list had also been split to represent the demand in each of the Neighbourhood Areas. A general list was also still available for those people who had indicated that they would take up the tenancy on any plot across the Borough.

Members expressed their views about the importance of implementing the Neighbourhood Area lists to support the Neighbourhood Working agenda. In future any applicant on the general list would only be allowed to refuse a plot on one occasion, then be placed on the relevant Neighbourhood Area list.

Some thought was given as to how the plots should be allocated when they become vacant and it was decided that for existing sites, plots would be offered to those who had been on the waiting list the longest. For all new allotment sites there would be a 50/50 allocation split between applicants on the relevant area list and applicants on the general waiting list.

Recommendations:

1. That applicants apply annually to the Council to be kept on the lists.
2. That any vacant plot be firstly offered to the person who has been on the waiting list the longest.
3. That applicants on the general waiting lists only be allowed to refuse a plot on one occasion, then placed onto the relevant Neighbourhood Area list
4. That all new sites be allocated by a 50/50 split between the Neighbourhood Area list and the General list to support the Neighbourhood Working Agenda.

Tenancy Agreements

All tenants must sign up to a Tenancy Agreement when they take up occupancy of a plot. It is this document that sets out the rules and conditions that must be adhered to. Members were keen for these controls to be tightened in order to facilitate effective management and enforcement procedures and to avoid subjectivity being applied when considering further action.

Recommendations:

1. That the Tenancy Agreement be reviewed to include:
 - Appropriate rules and conditions to promote higher standards of maintenance.
 - Definitive guidance and procedures on non compliance issues, to protect the Councils position.

Planning Guidance

At the last meeting the Head of Planning Services outlined some of the issues relating to planning permissions on private allotment sites. Both Members and the representatives present shared concerns that the planning laws seemed ambiguous and asked if any guidance could be provided on this matter.

It had also been explained that an Open Space Study had been commissioned by the three districts of Chorley, South Ribble and Preston to inform the Joint Local Development Framework Core Strategy and Site Allocations. This had not yet been published, but would inform open space policy on allotment provision. The Chorley Allotments Society expressed a wish to be consulted on this work and the development of the policy.

Recommendations:

1. That the Head of Planning Services be asked to provide written guidance/policy for planning permissions relating to private allotment sites.
2. That the Head of Planning Services arrange a meeting with representatives of the Chorley Allotments Society to discuss the Open Space Study.

Chair