

The Allotment Strategy



Adopted December 2014

Allotment Strategy

Executive Summary

This strategy puts in place a framework in which allotments can thrive now, and into the future. The emphasis is on self management and how allotment associations can achieve more, but only if that is what they wish.

The strategy understands that self management comes in differing shapes and sizes. At one extreme it can mean an association taking over total control of an allotment site; at the other, it may be that they just have an involvement in identifying neglected plots and assisting in the letting of new ones.

Following on from consultation it was clear that associations are currently not interested in taking on many powers and responsibilities from the City Council. This however, may change, as such the strategy provides for a range of transfer of powers.

Whatever happens, the City Council recognizes that allotment provision is a statutory (legal) requirement and as such the City Council will always be required, and able to manage allotments if needed. The Strategy makes clear that if an association does want significantly more powers, then this will have to be put to a vote of all allotment holders on that particular site.

The strategy also clarifies a number of issues in particular future charging regimes. It is confirmed that this will continue to be charged by the square metre, and any increases will only be down to inflation. It also confirms that water charging while a component of the rent will not be charged separately, however, we will look at

water consumption as this is a significant cost in providing the service.

Towards the end of the document there is an action plan, this details the work programme of the allotment officer and other members of the Countryside and Land team. Of particular interest is the commitment to produce allotment site plans. These will be drawn up with associations/plot holders and will identify where particular action is needed whether it be security, parking or tree management. These will then be taken forward by all parties involved with the particular site.

The strategy also recognises that there appears to be sustained interest in allotment gardening leading to areas of the City where there is under provision. The strategy makes clear we use the development process, our own land holding and our ability to negotiate with private landowners to increase provision especially in those areas currently experiencing long waiting lists.

The strategy has been subject to consultation and it is anticipated it will be a rolling document with no end date as such but updated as and when necessary.

Introduction

Allotments have a long and honourable history. Their popularity has come and gone depending on need and fashion. In the last few years they have enjoyed what appears to be a sustained revival as people realise the benefits of home grown food, as well as the feel good factor of open air activity.

Certainly allotments fulfil many of the objectives of the healthy living agenda and, as such, the City Council is keen to support them, and engender an environment where they can thrive and add to the well being of the City.

Allotments are also social outlets and provide a vehicle for people from a wide range of backgrounds and cultures to come together in pursuit of a common goal - that of growing fruit, vegetables and flowers.

Allotments are open un-developed spaces in what are often dense urban areas. They provide open space, a valuable green lung and a refuge for a surprising amount of wildlife.

Understanding that the allotment service was not as good as it could be, the City Council set up an Allotment Task and Finish Group. Reporting in 2007, the Group recognized the importance of allotments and made a number of recommendations. Many of these recommendations have been implemented and significant progress has been achieved over the past few years. Much of this has been in partnership with Allotment Associations and other volunteer organisations without which so much progress would not have been possible. The purpose of this document is to build on this work and ensure any relevant outstanding tasks are implemented.

What is an allotment?

There are two types of allotment provision: Allotments and Allotment Gardens.

An 'allotment' is a parcel of land not more than 5 acres in extent, cultivated as a garden or farm. An 'allotment garden' is a parcel of land not exceeding 40 poles, (1,012m²), cultivated by the occupier for the provision of vegetables and fruit crops for himself and his family. By definitions outlined in the Allotment Act of 1922, an allotment garden is wholly or mainly cultivated by the occupier for the production of fruit or vegetables for consumption by himself and his family. The definition gives allotment authorities some flexibility to determine what is grown, but care should be taken when relaxing restrictions so that the character of the site is maintained.

All allotment sites provided by Gloucester City Council are allotment gardens.

Allotment provision is a statutory function and whilst an authority *may* provide allotments, there is a statutory obligation for Gloucester City to provide allotment gardens sufficient to meet the demand.

There are statutory and non-statutory allotments. The former were acquired or appropriated by the City Council for use as allotments. These cannot be sold or used for other purposes without the consent of the Secretary of State. Non-statutory allotments are on land allocated for other uses but leased or rented for use as allotments (not necessarily in City Council ownership).

Purpose of this strategy

As the population in Gloucester grows, as gardens get smaller and as concerns about food and its provenance increase, then we expect demand for allotments to grow. The purpose of the strategy is to; ensure that allotments space is used as efficiently as possible, to provide a structure for the provision of new allotments and to ensure that the service is as good as it can be within quite strict financial constraints.

The last point is particularly important given the pressure on local authority budgets. The general tenor of this document therefore, will be trying to do more with less.

Self management is a means of achieving this and for many allotment communities outside of Gloucester this is how allotments are run.

This document therefore will actively encourage associations and other groupings to consider more self management as a means of improving the way in which allotments are run within Gloucester City.

This document is a high level strategy essentially providing the general overview of where we, as an organisation should be going with regard to allotments. Detailed issues about each site and what needs to be done will be dealt with through separate site plans. These will be drawn up with the relevant association or whatever group comes forward representing the site.

The strategy takes forward the work undertaken by the Task and Finish Group in 2007 indeed many of the recommendations of the Group are included in the action plan at the end of the document.

There are also links to the Public Open Space Strategy which promotes the use of some areas of open space as allotments and a context for negotiating new allotments as part of development.

Current provision

In Gloucester, there are 12 allotment sites providing 846 allotments varying in size from 12m² up to 370m². The most common being the old 5 perch (half 10 perch) or 126m².

The following table is a brief resume of each of the separate sites detailing how many there are, their status etc. This was correct at time of writing in November 2014 and is meant as a guide only.

Snapshot of Allotment Provision and Demand as of November 2014

Location	Size Ha	Current No of Plots	Vacant	Waiting List	Statutory/ Non-statutory	Ward
Cotteswold Road	0.10	6	0	11	Non-statutory	Matson & Robinswood
Deans Way	0.15	6	0	10	Non-statutory	Kingsholm & Wotton
Estcourt Close	3.99	195	4	26	Statutory	Longlevens
Estcourt Park	1.68	84	4	13	Statutory	Longlevens
Hawthorn	1.21	61	8	55	Statutory	Moreland
Hempsted	0.05	2	0	10	Non-statutory	Westgate
Innsworth	0.23	131	8	4	Statutory	Longlevens
Robert Raikes	0.83	62	1	69	Statutory	Tuffley
Saintbridge	4.19	224	27	72	Statutory	Barnwood
Tredworth Fields	0.62	36	16	45	Statutory	Moreland
White City	0.63	29	0	36	Statutory	Matson & Robinswood
Willow Way	0.08	10	1	1	Non-Statutory	Barnwood
New site Podsmead						Podsmead
New site - Kingsway				196		Quedgeley Fieldcourt
Totals	13.76	846	69	548		

Demand

As previously mentioned, there appears to be a revival in demand for allotments, as evidenced by the length of the waiting lists for all of the sites. These have been growing over the past few years and currently stand at 519. While the new facility at Kingsway should make inroads, there is still a very real need for more allotments.

Presently when people ask for an allotment they are added to the list for the nearest site, unless special circumstances dictate otherwise. Plots are then allocated on a first come, first served basis.

In trying to provide for that demand, we need to make the most efficient use of the available plots and, where possible, identify new sites.

There are a number of ways of doing this:

Subdividing plots: There are still a lot of 10 perch (253m²) and even larger plots. As a matter of course, unless there is no waiting list and a new plot holder requires a large plot, then each large plot will be subdivided, typically into two. If a plot holder with a good track record of plot maintenance wishes to grade up from a small to a large plot, then this will be viewed sympathetically; though will depend on overall demand for plots on the site.

Allotment Squatting: For all sorts of reasons, at some point in their lives, people will have to give up their allotment. This can be straight forward, with the authority being informed and the allotment being allocated to another individual. Sometimes, however, it is not straightforward and months can pass before the allotment is re-allocated. This is a difficult area as there may be very legitimate reasons why an individual cannot tend their plot. It may be, for example, that they have an illness and once better they may well be able to tend their allotment again. This is not always the case and sometimes holders 'sit' on their allotment when really they have little intention of using it productively again. In these instances we need to be sympathetic but firm, especially when there are long waiting lists. Self managed allotments tend to police this issue better.

New allotments: As part of large scale developments the City Council, as planning authority, will look to negotiate new allotment sites. This is all the more important given the size of gardens in new developments. Kingsway was the first such provision for a number of years and ,when complete ,will provide 22 half plots (126m²), over 50 quarter-sized plots (64m²) plus a number of raised beds for those

with mobility impairment. The forthcoming City Plan (the Spatial Planning document for Gloucester) will include policies encouraging new provision in large development sites.

Re-use of other open space: The Public Open Space Strategy identifies a number of open spaces within the City that do not really function as amenity land. There may be an opportunity to use some of these in a more productive manner and convert them to allotments or some other growing space.

Finally, there are areas within the City that have poor provision, in particular Hucclecote, Quedgeley and Hempsted. These tend to be on the periphery of the City and the City Council will work with Parish Councils, community groups and others to increase provision either within or, potentially, outside the administrative boundary of Gloucester to increase provision.

Under-utilized sites and disposals

Allotments are currently popular and there are waiting lists for all sites. However, this may not always be the case. While we should not dispose of allotments due to a short drop in demand, if over a long period of time, allotments do remain vacant, then the authority should not shy away from finding alternative uses. There may indeed be small areas on larger sites that are unpopular, even though as a whole, the site is well cultivated. Any change from allotments needs to be thought through very carefully as inevitably it will be permanent. If money is raised as part of this process then it should be ring fenced to be used on allotments elsewhere. If it is part of a larger site that is lost, then a proportion of any money raised should be spent on that particular site. There may of

course be covenants and other restrictions on some sites preventing alternative uses.

Self-management and processes towards it

There are many different models of allotment management and these will vary across the country. In some areas the Local Authority is very much the lead partner. In others they have very little involvement other than as a planning authority, i.e. protecting sites from development. Between these two extremes there are many combinations.

In Gloucester City, the lead role leans towards the local authority and while there are certain benefits to this, it can be frustrating for Allotment Associations who perhaps want to have a little more control in how their allotments are run.

There are also potential financial benefits to the Associations from community-based control as funders are always happier supporting local groups rather than local authorities.

The City Council therefore, will be supportive of any requests by Allotment Associations either individually or collectively to pursue greater self management. At one extreme this could mean total control being invested in the association, allowing them to set a charge, collect rents and do the things that the City Council does (or would like to do) now. At the other extreme, the City Council would still maintain overall responsibility and control, but certain aspects of allotment management, such as allocating plots, could be carried out by the association.

The process by which associations would move towards more self management is contained at Appendix 1 towards the end of this document. Also included is a 'pick and mix' list of the sort

of tasks/responsibilities that could be passed over from the City to an Association.

It is assumed that associations will want a level of self management somewhere between the two extremes and we will actively engage with associations and other stakeholders to help them achieve what they think is best for their particular site.

What must be clear, however, is that before any significant control of any site can be handed over to an Association then some sort of mandate must be gained, not just from association members, but from allotment holders on the site as a whole. It will also need the association to have clear and appropriate terms of references in place that will safeguard the needs of plot holders.

The City will assist any allotment association in this process to allow an appropriate vote to take place. More modest transfers of authority will not need vote.

Consultation on this strategy showed there was a limited appetite for a significant degree of self management, this however, may change and the City will keep an open mind in this regard. There was also a concern that if allotment associations did take over management and then collapsed then the City must be prepared to take back control. Given the City Council's statutory duties in this respect it is clear that the City would need to step in if such a situation arose.

Where there is no association in place then the City will encourage one to be set up as it is recognised that the needs of allotment holders are better serviced with some sort of local

organisation in place to represent the views of plot holders.

Tenancy agreement/finances

There are a number of charging methods used by local authorities and allotment associations across the UK and they all have their supporters and detractors. At one level it would seem fair to charge by the square metre but the administration cost for a large plot is exactly the same as a small one. Alternatively if there are charge thresholds then someone will always sit the wrong side of the threshold and feel hard done by.

Following a review of its fees, the Council planned to follow the lead of some other authorities and to charge by threshold. Plots were to be designated as being small (<99m²), medium (100-149m²) or large (>150m²) with a corresponding charge. While there are some administrative benefits to this system, when it was announced, a number of representations were received supporting the status quo, i.e. charging by the square metre.

At the same time it was planned to remove age related concessions, though those in receipt of Housing and/or Council Tax support could claim a 50% reduction. The loss of age related concessions again was subject to a number of representations.

Following discussions it was decided to maintain the current system at least for the year 2014 - 2015. Following on from then it is proposed to continue charging by the square metre. Concessions will include those in receipt of Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Support, it is also proposed to continue with the age related benefit, however, this will be

standardised for male and females at 65. Those females currently receiving age-related benefit will continue to do so. New female allotment holders and those who are not 60 as of December 31st 2014 will not.

From then on the price will increase by inflation on an annual basis. This is standard practice and the indices used throughout the Council (based on RPI) will be utilized.

As mentioned later in this strategy we will investigate the possibility of charging a different rate for water used at each site. A site which is a heavy user of water will not be subsidized by one that is a light user.

We will also look into changing the 'allotment year'. Currently this starts in January. If it began in November it would be more in line with the seasonal requirements associated with the service.

Sustainability

Allotments are inherently sustainable. They provide a means of local food production that is inevitably less intensively produced than commercially produced fruit, vegetables and flowers. Allotments also contribute to community well being, healthy active lifestyles and many other un-costed benefits to society as a whole.

They are also open spaces in their own right providing relief from urban form and attract a surprising diversity of wildlife.

Of course sustainability is a relative concept and some allotments will be more sustainable than others. While we would not wish to get into too much detail as what is and is not acceptable practice, there are issues around water

consumption and being a good neighbour that do need addressing.

Water use

Water is a precious resource and while often there is far too much we have had a number of summers where there has been too little. Plants need water to grow and for some fruit and veg irrigation is often essential. However, water from standpipes costs money and can represent 30% of the income from allotment rents. There is a financial as well sustainability argument as to why we should all be careful with water use.

If self management becomes more widespread this is something that associations may wish to address themselves - however, in the interim, the City Council will investigate restrictions on the use of unattended sprinklers for example through tenancy agreements. We will also make it clear in allotment invoices how much of the charge goes to pay for water use.

Green waste

Good soil-husbandry depends on organic matter. Compost is a simple means of providing this. All allotment holders will be encouraged to compost all their green waste, although it is accepted that some waste may be diseased and, along with pernicious weeds cannot be composted in a normal heap. Burning (though only occasional burning of dry, diseased waste) is an option but is generally unsociable and in some instances removal from site may be the only alternative. To assist we will look into the feasibility of community composting, perhaps in association with the Council's waste contractor where larger, hotter heaps can be constructed. We will endeavour to continue the occasional deliveries of soil conditioner organised with

help from the Council's waste contractor dependant on demand, cost and availability.

Occasional skips for one-off clearances when asked for by Associations will be favourably looked upon.

Other issues

What can and cannot be grown

The initial allotment acts required a plot to be cleared at the end of each season. Technically, growing rhubarb was not allowed as it was a permanent perennial. Yet perennials are a sustainable and often a low maintenance means of extracting productivity from an allotment.

While the City Council is largely responsible for allotments, it will not be too involved in what can and cannot be grown on an allotment. Whilst not wishing to be too prescriptive, we will look to update our guide, detailing what is appropriate to grow on an allotment. This and the guidelines on sheds/structures and the role of animals (bees and chickens) may be something that Allotment Associations decide they want to control. We will support this.

Selling of produce

Allotment legislation requires that an allotment garden is 'wholly or mainly cultivated by the occupier for the production of fruit or vegetables for consumption by himself and his family'. Selling on a commercial basis is therefore considered unacceptable; however, small scale sales of excess produce, for example, through associations, would be appropriate.

Vandalism and theft

For some allotment holders this can be a real problem. To have carefully tended produce pointlessly trashed or stolen is heart breaking and may even cause some holders to give up. We will encourage individuals to report all incidents of theft and vandalism and will do what we can within the tight financial constraints to make allotments as secure as possible, without making them look like a fortress. We will work with allotment holders and associations to make them more secure and, where appropriate, seek external funding and make the most of opportunistic works to improve security.

We also need to work with local communities, the police and other stakeholders to try and address the problem at source. Certainly we will be aiming to bring our Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) expertise to play in engaging with local people.

The role of our grounds maintenance contractor

The role of Amey will vary from site to site. Their detailed role therefore will be covered in the Site Plans. However, they tend to look after the large paths and open spaces within allotments and the boundary fences. As with previous issues, associations may wish to have more control over this aspect of maintenance.

Education

While we do give new plot holders a welcome pack to help them, too many still give up after the first season. Often it is just that they needed more information/training about what to grow and how to grow it.

We will work therefore with providers such as The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) to set up training projects/workshops where new plot holders can learn about good husbandry and issues such as wise water use, etc.

Gloucester City Council policies

The City Council already has a number of policies that are generally supportive of allotments and their continued use. The most relevant are:

Sustainable Development Strategy for Gloucester 2000: This broadly supports the non commercial sale of allotment produce.

Local Plan Second Stage Deposit 2002 contains two policies relevant to allotments:

Policy A1 New Housing and Allotments. This proposes a standard of 0.2 acres per 1000 residents. Off-site provision may be acceptable (page 131).

Policy A2 Protection of Allotments. Broadly planning permission involving loss of allotments will not be permitted unless the requirements around unmet demand, replacement provision and enhancement of asset are met (Page 132).

Open Space Strategy 2014. This requires the preparation and publication of an Allotment strategy. The potential for new allotment sites on Public Open Space and the negotiation of new allotments as part of new development.

Conclusions

Local Government is going through an era of unprecedented reform. Local communities are increasingly taking control of their neighbourhoods and it is the expectation that the decision making process and funding will be moved further down to users.

Allotments are no different and Gloucester City Council will pursue an allotment structure where more control sits with associations and plot holders than is the case now.

Where there is a desire therefore, from associations and plot holders for a more active role then we will do our best to facilitate their needs.

As mentioned at the beginning of this strategy allotments have a long and honourable history. Gloucester City Council wishes to build on this and ensure that allotments are as fit for purpose in the C21st as they were when first appeared in the C19th.

Delivery Plan

The following delivery plan will seek to ensure that the proposals set out in the strategy are implemented. The actions are based on the recommendations made by the Task and Finish group in 2007, supplemented by other more recent developments.

With limited funding some of the proposals will take time. Actions have been given a timeframe of short, medium and long term, corresponding to approximately less than 1 year, 1 to 5 years and more than 5 years, respectively.

Task	Funding	How	Comment	Timescale
Pursue self-management where there is support from the association.	Officer time. Association resource.	Work with associations and other groups to facilitate a higher degree of self management.	Any significant degree of self management will have to be with consent of allotment holders.	Short to long.
Role of the Allotment Officer to be clarified and put in place.	Rental income.	Current income can continue to fund a part-time officer.	Situation to be reviewed if significant number of associations opt for self management.	Short to long.
Planning Policy is incorporated into the new City Plan protecting allotments and requiring new ones as part of large scale development.	Part of City Plan Process. Officer time.	Incorporate allotment policies into City Plan.	City Plan is currently on hold pending work on the Joint Core Strategy. Stage 3 to be published Winter 2014/15.	Short.
Increase provision of raised allotment beds.	External.	Through Section 106 on new developments and through bidding process.	Kingsway will provide some raised allotments. Success will need to be monitored before further	Medium to long.

			funding sought.	
Address areas of poor provision through alternative uses for council and privately owned land.	Officer time.	Work with parish councils and other bodies to identify potential allotment sites. Negotiate provision on large development sites (see above).	POS strategy contains proposals for finding alternative uses (inc allotments) for POS. Private land can become allotments with willing land owner.	Short to long.
Increase provision through subdivision and stricter requirements on abandoned allotments.	Officer time. Association resource.	Continue policy of large plot subdivision. With associations pursue firm action on uncultivated plots. Ensure plots are held by City residents of within half a mile of City boundary.	It is assumed that, if Allotment Associations pursue a more active role, they will want to manage their areas in a rigorous manner to ensure that allotments tenancies are not abused.	Short to long.
Encourage more sustainable use of water.	Officer time. Association resource.	Unattended sprinklers to be addressed through tenancy agreement.	It is expected that water provision will increasingly be an issue. The modest measures suggested will be reviewed.	Short to long.
Allow a more proactive policy on what can and cannot be grown/done on an allotment.	Officer time. Association resource.	Adopt policy that allows certain produce to be grown such as top fruit. Allow Associations to rule on issues such as bee hives and chickens.	Top fruit can be a low maintenance means of having a productive Allotment. Associations can deal with the more local issues of bees, etc if they wish.	Short.
Increases security across sites.	External funding.	Submit funding and use other opportunities to better fencing and other security measures.	Some sites such as Saintbridge are large and difficult to fence. However, all opportunities need to be explored such as Section 106 agreements and external funding.	Medium to long.

Keep allotment holders updated as to current developments.	Officer time.	Publish an annual newsletter updating allotment holders. Host a web page. Hold an annual meeting of Allotment Associations.	Simple, short and low cost publication along with a web page.	Short to medium.
Change the allotment year to run from November.	Officer time.	Work with Associations and Civica to change billing timetable.	This will allow a full winter to sort out problems of re-letting.	Short to medium.
Encourage associations where they do not exist.	Officer time.	Work with existing associations and plot holders to encourage uptake.	Very small sites may not be appropriate.	Short to medium.

Appendix 1. Moving towards Self-Management

Process involved in moving towards self management followed by 'pick and mix' of services and functions currently undertaken, either in whole or in part by the City Council that could be carried out by an association.

- City Council to talk to allotment association about the possibility of more self-management. Where none exists, City will talk to individual plot holders to gauge their interest.
- Associations who express an interest discuss at committee level what they would like to do.
- Associations discuss with City Council as to whether their aspirations need formal vote or can be carried out with informal agreement.
- Associations enter dialogue with their members.
- If can be carried out without vote then implement changes, if not carry on process.
- If still interested Associations to hold EGM/AGM to formally discuss matters with their members.
- Associations to submit business case (on one or two sides of A4), detailing what they would like to do, their capacity as an association/group and how they intend to do it. Associations to be properly constituted.

- If business case broadly in line with Allotment Strategy and legislation then City to instigate vote. If possible honest broker employed to answer questions (this may be a FAQs compiled with help from The National Allotment Society or other honest broker).
- City Council writes to plot-holders and initiates vote, again with assistance (if appropriate) from an honest broker. Simple majority vote on yes or no motion. Only one vote per year per association.
- Depending on vote, begin handing over powers to associations.
- Depending on level of engagement, City Council to negotiate with associations on the nature of the relationship. This may or may not need some sort of legal agreement.
- Hand over responsibility.

The following is a list of functions/services that Associations can, if they wish take over. It is not exhaustive and is not a hierarchy. Some of these functions can be carried out without recourse to the above process.

- Sharing of information (will need consent of plot holders).
- Become principle key holder.
- Plot checking.
- Plot letting.
- Access to waiting lists.
- Site management (monitoring).
- Site management (implementation).
- Drawing up of site management plans.
- Site upgrading and security.
- Drawing up of additional allotment rules and guidelines.
- Enforcement of allotment rules.
- Formal leasehold arrangement.
- Billing/invoicing, chasing bad debts.

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