

Brighton & Hove City Council

Environment, Transport & Sustainability Committee

Agenda Item 9

Subject: Allotments Update

Date of meeting: 21 June 2022

Report of: Interim Executive Director Economy, Environment & Culture

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Ward(s) affected: All

For general release

1. Purpose of the report and policy context

- 1.1 This report provides Environment, Transport & Sustainability Committee with an update on the work of the Allotment Service within City Parks. It provides:
- an update on the Allotment Strategy
 - the Brighton and Hove Allotment Federation (BHAF) business case for allotments
 - an update on empty plots and lettings
 - an update on new allotment sites
 - an update on the delivery of the Open Spaces Strategy

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Committee notes the updates contained in this report.
- 2.2 That the Committee notes the 2021 Outline Business Case for Allotments in Brighton & Hove report commissioned by the BHAF which is contained in Appendix 1.

3. Context and background information

- 3.1 In 2014, the Allotment Service worked with BHAF to develop an Allotment Strategy, which identified over 100 actions to develop the service.
- 3.2 In 2017, City Parks produced the Open Spaces Strategy which contained one policy and four actions pertaining to the development of allotments which can be seen in the supporting document links.
- 3.3 On 24 November 2020, an update on the Open Spaces Strategy to this committee recommended that: *the committee approves the initiation of a consultation in relation to a refresh of the Allotments Strategy 2014- 2024 Delivery Plan, to ensure transparency and a refocus on delivery of the objectives of the strategy.*

- 3.4 On the 18 January 2022, a report was presented to this committee in response to a Notice of Motion to look at: the BHAF business case, empty plots and the 'letting' service and potential new sites for allotments.
- 3.5 In February 2022 officers met with the BHAF to discuss several of the topics, the most pertinent being plot lettings. During this meeting, BHAF tabled a process to streamline the letting process for empty plots.

The Allotment Strategy

- 3.6 In 2020, BHAF made representations to the council to ensure the Allotments Strategy 2014 - 2024 was progressed at a faster pace than in the preceding years. As a result, an additional Project Officer was appointed to focus on delivery of the strategy.
- 3.7 As of April 2022, over 60% of the Allotment Strategy actions had either been completed, consolidated or agreed with BHAF that they were obsolete. The remaining actions were re-categorised and compiled into the list which can be found in Appendix 2. The list contains 24 actions: four are completed, thirteen are partially completed and the remaining seven have not yet been progressed. It is anticipated that 80% of the remaining actions will be completed by June 2023. Some of the actions not yet progressed may take longer as they require personal data from an Equalities Impact Assessment consultation.

The BHAF Business Case for Allotments

- 3.8 The December 2021 business case commissioned by BHAF explores the wider benefits and roles that allotments play for individuals, communities, and the city. The report identified several key auxiliary policies which allotments supported including:
- Becoming Carbon Neutral by 2030
 - Increasing healthy life expectancy and reduce health inequalities
 - Promoting and protecting biodiversity
 - Reducing, reusing and recycling, and
 - Transitioning to a sustainable economy
- 3.9 It identifies both the physical and mental health benefits that many plot holders experience and considers the biodiversity abundance that allotments create. It is also able to provide hypothetical financial values that allotments have beyond the day-to-day cost and expenditures which councils focus on when assessing the service.
- 3.10 The primary financial conclusion stated that: *'Overall, the council's existing allotment provision benefits the city - including wider council departments - by a minimum of £385,567 each year, alongside food worth an estimated £1.12m.'*
- 3.11 It is worth noting that the figures above are not cash savings but estimated notional or non-cashable savings across the council arising from the wider health and social benefits of allotments.

- 3.12 The report succeeds in opening the debate regarding the values attributed and experienced by those utilising allotments. The challenge for BHAF, and the service, will be ensuring that all plot holders receive a consistent and high-quality experience. Moreover, determining how 2000 plus people on the waiting list, can more expediently access the service given the limited plots available, will also be a challenge.

Empty Plots and Lettings

- 3.13 During the pandemic there was both an increased demand for plots and an increased numbers of plots left untended, often due to people keeping themselves safe or self-isolation. All parties were concerned with the growing waiting list, now containing over 2000 people, and realised that a more concerted effort was needed to clear and occupy empty unlet or under-utilised plots. In February 2022, BHAF presented a proposal to expedite the letting process. This streamlining initiative is currently being implemented by Site Reps across the service, working with City Parks to reduce current vacancies.
- 3.14 There are currently 2675 individual allotment tenancies, and 109 unallocated full plots on the system. Between 17 September 2021 and 25 May 2022, approximately 194 new plots were issued, and 198 plots were terminated.
- 3.15 A key element to improve turn around times and lettings of vacant plots is an improved ICT system which enable a greater degree of self service and provides more information to plot holders and prospective plot holders. This is a priority for BHAF as well as the council and officers are working on a project to implement a new system by the end of the financial year.

New Allotment Sites

- 3.16 Two potential new allotment sites have been identified as future allotments for the city. These options are currently being explored. However, to deliver new sites will require a dedicated project manager and significant capital investment.
- 3.17 Consideration as to the resources required to deliver these will need to be considered through future budget setting processes.
- 3.18 The council continues to review future sites in a dialogue with BHAF and internal stakeholders.
- 3.19 It is recommended that the current focus needs to be on minimising the void rate and turnaround time for empty plots, maximising occupation of existing plots and investing in the infrastructure of existing sites to contribute to those aims.

2017 Open Spaces Strategy policies and actions update

- 3.20 Work is continuing to deliver the allotment-related actions in the Open Spaces Strategy:
- 3.21 Policy 1) Continue to work with the BHAF to become more financially self-sufficient wherever possible and practicable.
Action A) Work collaboratively with the BHAF to identify where savings can be made.
- BHAF were successful in coordinating a voluntary fund for allotments from plot holders that has attracted between £4,000 and £6,000 each year for the service since 2018. City Parks continues to work with BHAF to identify other financially self-sufficient initiatives where possible.
- 3.22 Action B) Review the existing Allotment Strategy principles and objectives to reflect the ongoing dialogue with the BHAF.
- As mentioned earlier in the report, the council is working closely with BHAF to implement the Allotment Strategy.
- 3.23 Action C) Draw up a programme to reduce water leaks at allotment sites.
- The council invested over £50,000 in 2022 to tackle the worst leaks on the largest allotment site – The Weald. Repairs have also taken place in Eastbrook Farm (2019) and South Weald Allotments (2022) which had complete new water system installed, North Nevil, Campsite and St Louis Allotments have had partial replacement to the water systems (2020).
 - North Weald water infrastructure is to be replaced in winter 2022, Cravenvale/Whitehawk, Roedale Valley and Larkhill water systems to be investigated and improvements identified.
 - Leaks are inevitable with such a large portfolio of water infrastructure across 37 sites covering 122 acres of land. Southern Water will be inspecting all BHCC allotment water infrastructure and dictating any works required to adhere to current water regulations.
 - It is anticipated that a review from Southern Water within the next 24 months will expedite the need for City Parks to repair and upgrade the allotment water systems. The review is being anticipated following a similar inspection that took place in Worthing earlier this year for their allotments. It is expected that many allotment sites will need upgrading due to the age of the infrastructure.
- 3.24 Action D) Work with allotment holders to explore water-saving opportunities.
- Work with allotment holders to explore water-saving opportunities is supported by a document BHAF produced. Some of these ideas were featured in Issue 3 of the 2019 'Allotments and Leisure Gardener' periodical. The council is also planning to create a trial garden using a number of water saving interventions to test and promote the water saving concepts. It is anticipated the demo garden [if approved] could be installed by the end of 2023.

4. Analysis and consideration of alternative options

- 4.1 As the report is predominantly an informative update of activity within the allotment service since 2014, there is not a direct requirement to consider and analyse alternative options.

5. Community engagement and consultation

- 5.1 The recent increase in engagement and contact with BHAF, Site Reps and Allotment Associations has helped to strengthen communications with a core part of the service. These interactions will be ongoing to ensure the stable growth and development of the service.
- 5.2 In addition, the recent successful Site Rep training has assisted in bringing new and more experienced volunteers together in a positive environment. It is anticipated that these training events will continue at least annually for all Site Reps.
- 5.3 The Allotment Strategy 2014 – 2024 gave rise to extensive consultations with plot holders to produce the report and accompanying actions.
- 5.4 The Open Spaces Strategy remains one of the most successful consultations attracting over 3500 responses. The document was able to capture the key challenges facing the allotment service within the context of the wider City Parks priorities.
- 5.5 It is anticipated that further consultations will be undertaken with Site Reps, people on the waiting list and plot holders in the coming 6-12 months to ratify the findings and development of the Allotment Strategy. Following on from this work, it is anticipated that an Equality Impact Assessment would also be carried out to ensure accessibility to all of the benefits of allotments and growing projects for the most vulnerable people in the community.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 The progression of the Allotment Strategy, Open Spaces Strategy, the Notice of Motion and the business case commissioned by BHAF are all contributing to moving the service forward in the right direction. The appointment of an additional Project Officer dedicated to the service has been instrumental in improving outputs and building confidence for all of those involved.
- 6.2 Since the November 2020 committee report, the council has progressed 13 of the remaining 24 strategy actions and completed another four. The team has met with BHAF, Site Reps and Associations to build relationships and improve communication. Crucially, regular meeting held approximately every four months will provide an important interface with BHAF and the Site Reps.
- 6.3 The next 6-12 months and delivering the remainder of the Strategy will be important in strengthening the service so that many more people can benefit from the positive attributes associated with growing food.

- 6.4 The need to repair leaks and proactively support plot holders to conserve water will most likely increase in prominence due to climate change policies, water cost and pressure from Southern Water.
- 6.5 The need to continually improve the lettings process will be a priority so that as many residents who desire a plot can do so within a shortened amount of time. Equally it is hoped that the partnership BHAF will continue to improve as all parties can see the tangible improvements being implemented from the ongoing dialogue linked to the Allotment Strategy.

7. Financial implications

- 7.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from the recommendations of this report.
- 7.2 Should a decision be made in the future to repair and upgrade the water systems within allotments, funding will need to be identified and project included within the Capital Programme.

Name of finance officer consulted: John Lack Date consulted: 24/05/2022

8. Legal implications

- 8.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from the recommendations in the report.

Name of lawyer consulted: Hilary Woodward Date consulted 25/05/2022

9. Equalities implications

- 9.1 A review of the Allotment Strategy and the actions has identified the need to complete an Equalities consultation to better understand the demographics and needs of the allotment plot holders.
- 9.2 A concerted effort has been made to publicise and utilise the three locations where more accessible raised beds are located for those with greater mobility needs.

10. Sustainability implications

- 10.1 Central to the function of allotments is access to water for plants. City Parks has been working with the Estates Team to address the worst water leaks which are known to officers. In 2022, £50,000 was invested in the Weald to tackle the worst leaks. Previously to this, a further £15,000 was used to fix leaks at other sites.
- 10.2 The BHAF Business case appendix 1 sets out a wide range of benefits in terms of reducing carbon emissions, benefits for biodiversity and for climate change management in addition to introducing more sustainable ways of producing food. All of these factors are significant contributors to the councils ambitions to become Carbon Neutral by 2030. Importantly good

onsite composting and organic growing techniques that happen at Allotment Site provide soil enrichment at a time when concerns are growing about the sterilisation of large parts of commercial farmland.

11. Other Implications

Social Value and procurement implications

- 11.1 Procurement for the recent replacement water main at Weald Avenue was through the BHCC-ESCC Planned Maintenance Framework and jointly funded via the Corporate PMB and s106 funding. Tenders were assessed on a 90% cost / 10% Social Value basis, with the successful contractor donating funds to a local children's centre for IT equipment, as part of their Social Value commitment.
- 11.2 The BHAF Business Case in Appendix 1 sets out a wide range of social value benefits delivered through the provision of Allotments in the city. This is particularly relevant in the current economic climate having the potential to make a significant contribution to reducing food poverty and increasing social inclusion promoting volunteering and community based activities.

Public health implications:

- 11.3 The BHAF business case in appendix 1 reports highlights the multitude of health benefits for plot holders. As mentioned earlier in the report, the development of the service to its full potential will assist both existing and future plot holder in assisting their wellbeing.

Supporting Documentation

1. Appendices

- 1. Outline Business Case for Allotments in Brighton & Hove
- 2. Remaining actions of the Allotment Strategy

2. Background documents

- 1. [Brighton & Hove Allotment Strategy](#)
- 2. [Open Spaces Strategy](#)
- 3. [Open Spaces Strategy Update](#) to Environment, Transport & Sustainability Committee on 24 November 2020 (item 39)
- 4. [Allotments: Response to Notice of Motion](#) to Environment, Transport & Sustainability Committee on 18 January 2022 (item 75)

