

DATE: 26th November, 2009

Community Gardens Development

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Cllr Barry Sanders

1. Summary of report:

1.1 This report details the background to the provision of allotments within the Borough and highlights the review and restructuring of this service by the Green Space Service towards the development of community gardens through the newly created post of Community gardens Officer.

2. Background papers:

2.1 Allotments Strategy 2007

3. Reason for scrutiny:

3.1 Walsall council as with all Authorities has a statutory duty to provide allotments. The Council owns a total of 36 sites. Eleven of these sites containing 248 plots are managed directly by the Council with a further 25 sites containing 1,186 plots are managed through 5 allotment local management associations.

3.2 Social and economic changes along with a succession of legislative changes have influenced the use, popularity and provision of allotments over the years. Increasingly however the benefits of allotment provision to both the individual and community are now becoming well recognised.

3.3 Allotments are now not seen as just a means to provide fresh and cheap food but contribute greatly to the individuals health and well being through physical activity and social interaction and are often central to the development of a sense of community. This important leisure and recreational asset and pursuit links directly to the Councils healthy living and sustainability initiatives.

3.4 Demand for allotments varies throughout the Borough with some sites retaining long waiting lists for plots and others sites underused. The ground condition of some sites are totally unsuitable for cultivation however all sites require considerable investment to improve infrastructure particularly fencing, pathways and water systems.

3.5 In the past the allotment service has not been seen as a high priority in relation to other more high profile service areas. The limited investment attached to the service has restricted level of development and improvements to the sites.

This combined with the increasing incidents of damage, vandalism and theft has seen a constant deterioration in the infrastructure and deterring uptake

- 3.6 In 2007 Cabinet approved the Boroughs first allotment strategy which was a milestone in the future improvement and development of the allotment service, setting clear standards for the provision of allotments, increase uptake and improve levels and quality of service, increase the overall benefits derived from the allotment experience.
- 3.7 Where there is demand the strategy aims to increase provision to match the national average with plots available within two kilometres of every home. Address shortfalls in provision by utilising underused public open space if possible and examine alternative uses for existing allotment land were supply exceeds demand.
- 3.8 Over recent years there has been a growing interest in the development and establishment of community gardens which are a step away from the traditional allotment provision.
- 3.9 The Government has recognised the growing interest and importance of community gardens and supported their development through a number of avenues. They have now strengthened the policies and protections afforded to community gardens mainly through revised planning guidance (PPG17) as part of wider national policies to improve the quality of urban green spaces. The planning system through PPG17 (Planning for open space, sport and recreation) and PPS3 (Housing) provides a robust framework for the protection of urban green spaces and now recognises community gardens and city farms in its typology of open spaces and sets out that Local Authorities should undertake robust assessments of the needs of their local community .
- 3.10 Central funding through the Living Spaces programme and Growth Areas Fund has enabled some Communities and Local Authorities to fund and support the revival of urban green spaces including the establishment of community gardens. It has also given support to a range of organisations including Groundwork, the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens and the Allotments Regeneration Initiative all of which will provide support, advice and guidance to local authorities in establishing and maintaining Community Gardens.
- 3.11 Essentially community gardens are locally managed areas of land that develop in response to and reflect the needs of the communities in which they are based. They are essentially about helping the community and its people and can be used not only to grow plants but also provide a wide variety of social, recreational, educational and environmental services, facilities and opportunities that help meet local need and can make a positive contribution to regenerating local communities.
- 3.12 The allotments service within Green Spaces has been reviewed and restructured with the future focus now being made towards the delivery of community gardens. The post of allotments officer has now been deleted and a totally new post of Community Gardens Officer created. Although this new post will still have responsibilities for supporting the existing local management

associations and directly managed allotment sites its primary role is focused towards the establishment of self managed and sustainable community gardens and running of associated programmes, establishment allotment management associations, contribute to improving community physical and mental health, promote sound horticultural, sustainable and organic environmental practices provide training and an educational resource, lead on the strategic development and management of community gardens and establish close and collaborative partnerships in securing funding and developing and managing Community Gardens. In undertaking this role there are a number of key responsibilities:

- Develop and deliver a programme of establishing sustainable self managed community gardens and allotment management associations across the Borough
- Actively foster, develop and maintain close and collaborative working partnerships with both internal and external services and organisations in the establishment, management and development of community gardens
- Submit external funding bids to support the development of community gardens and regeneration and redevelopment of allotments
- Recruit Community Garden Volunteers, providing peer supervision and support and identifying training needs
- Assist partners in the recruitment, support and training of site development officers
- Develop community garden programmes which benefit disadvantaged or marginalised groups such as the elderly, people with learning difficulties, ethnic communities,
- Establish GP referral facilities establishing programmes to improve physical health, tackle obesity, assist people with dependencies and garden therapy for people with mental health difficulties etc
- Develop and operate educational out reach facilities within the community gardens providing opportunities for exercise and develop skills and knowledge in horticulture, ecology and healthy food production,
- Promote and articulate the philosophy of organic, sustainable environmentally friendly gardening and food production techniques,

3.13 It is hoped to recruit to the post of Community gardens Officer early in the new financial year.

3.14 There are many potential and possible land sources which could be considered for development as a community garden. These may include common or housing land, underused or derelict allotment land, hospital grounds, charity land, land within parks and open spaces, cemeteries, school grounds or other waste ground. In determining the suitability of each

potential site a number of further considerations need to be made. The size of the site must be suitable to accommodate a sustainable community group and support its programmes, it should be accessible to everyone in the community and can be easily made safe, are there groups, individuals, local community or businesses interested in developing the site, does the site have a catchment area, are there any planning restrictions on the site, rights of way, easements, or covenants and does the site have access to water and other utilities. Clearly this list is not exhaustive but indicates some of the key issues of consideration. The identification and evaluation of potential community garden sites will be a key function of the Community gardens Officer.

3.15 Interest has already been expressed in developing a community garden on the Herbert's Road Allotment Site in Darlaston. This is a designated allotment site which has been derelict for some years. Initial meetings have already taken place between representatives of the Green Space Service, Youth service, the Creative Development Team and the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens to initially explore the feasibility of this proposal. Further evaluation and consultation is now being undertaken with regard to this.

4. Resource and legal considerations:

4.1 Section 23 of 'the Smallholdings and Allotments Act 1908' specifically places a duty on Councils to provide allotments.

4.2 Under the terms of the Allotments Act 1925 ("the 1925 Act") and the Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908 ("the 1908 Act") the Council has an obligation to effectively ring fence receipts gained from the sale of land set aside for the purpose of allotments to either provide new allotment land were there is demand or enable the authority to undertake improvement to new or existing sites.

5. Citizen impact:

5.1 Community gardens are widely recognised as a valuable asset providing opportunities for recreation, physical activity and social interaction and contribute considerable to an individual's physical and mental well being. They are often central to the development of a sense of local community and link directly into Councils agendas and initiatives on promoting healthy lifestyles and sustainability.

6. Environmental impact:

6.1 Community Gardens not only offer opportunities for the production of fresh home grown vegetable and fruit produce but also growing ornamental flowers and garden plants. Educational programmes will encourage sound horticultural and environmental practices such as water conservation, composting and minimise the use of pesticides. They also provide opportunities for wildlife

habitats and conservation.

7. Performance management:

7.1 The development of underused or derelict land currently defined as allotments into Community Gardens can contribute greatly to the regeneration of an area providing opportunities for mental and physical well being, social inclusion, and community empowerment and enabling the physical improvement of sites by exploiting a variety of funding opportunities and community cohesiveness improving both the quality of life and environment for local communities.

8. Equality Implications:


8.1 Community Gardens develop in response to and reflect the needs of the communities in which they are based. The development of programmes which encourage engagement and integration by BME groups within the community gardens will be a key function of the Community Gardens Officer along with the development of therapy programmes for those dependency and mental health problems and GP referral programmes.

9. Consultation:

9.1 In the development of community gardens there will be wide consultation undertaken not just with the local community but with a range of other key stakeholders including elected members, friends groups.

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