

BEST VALUE SERVICE REVIEW



ALLOTMENTS

RESPONSIBLE OFFICER: MR.T.ROBSON, TOWN CLERK

REVIEW COMMITTEE

COUNCILLOR MRS E. SUMMERSON (CHAIRMAN)

COUNCILLORS A.R. HAWKES, J. EVERSON, J.W.SMITH

OFFICERS:

MR.G.NICKLIN, ACCOUNTANT

MR J.A.CLAYTON, SUPERVISING OFFICER

MR M.A.FOXTON, SENIOR GARDENER

MR M. RICHARDSON, GENERAL OPERATIVE

OUR CURRENT POSITION

THE MISSION STATEMENT

The Council consider its main purpose is to ensure that the Community of Spennymoor can democratically voice its opinion and that the Town Council can support the carrying out of those views and contribute towards the well being of the community, the economy and regeneration, all at an economical cost.

AIMS FOR THIS SERVICE

The Council's principal aims and objectives in providing the service of allotments are:-

1. To provide allotment plots for the recreational benefit of the Community.
2. To encourage the efficient operation of Local Allotment Associations thereby passing control from the Town Council to users of the service.
3. To promote and encourage self help measures on allotment sites.
4. To liaise with Associations to facilitate any grant opportunities that may exist.

DESCRIPTION OF THIS SERVICE

The service is not a statutory function. The Council has a total of 20 Allotment sites throughout the area (**See working papers**) providing a total of 721 plots. The sites are managed either directly by the Council or by Allotment Association on behalf of the Council. Allotments are on average 340 square metres in size and are let on an annual basis at a charge of £7.50. All sites have access to a water supply, which is included in the annual rental. The Council regularly inspects all sites and is responsible for all management issues along with the general repairs and maintenance of internal roads/paths and boundary fences.

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The following performance indicators are currently in place:

- i) Annual Income & Expenditure
- ii) Number of plots available
- iii) Number of vacant plots
- iv) Cost per resident
- v) Cost per site

CONSULTATION

In order to seek a consensus from the community as to whether Council Taxpayers value the provision and would like the Council to continue to provide an Allotment Service a 'sample survey' of local residents was conducted. The number of respondents to the survey was approximately 24%. Due to the fact that only a small number of respondents were Allotment holders the Town Council issued specific questionnaires to Allotment holders directly or via Association secretaries.

In order to ensure a wider view of the value of the Allotment Service, employees within the Council and Councillors were individually canvassed as to their views of the service being provided.

1. RESULTS FROM SURVEYS

Refer to the extract of the review and analysis of questionnaire responses
(Appendix 1)

Refer to the summary of results obtained from Specific questionnaires.
(Appendix 3) not yet completed

2. CONSULTATION WITH EMPLOYEES

Of staff consulted all were unanimous in their view that the provision of an Allotment Service provided a recreational facility benefiting the community.

3. CONSULTATION WITH COUNCIL MEMBERS

All Council Members were consulted and were unanimous in their view that the provision of an Allotment Service provided a recreational facility to be of overall benefit to the community.

4. CONSULTATION – NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ALLOTMENT AND LEISURE GARDENERS

The Association provides a substantial amount of information via its web site. Information downloaded is held on file.

COMPETITION

Is the service – Efficient?

The Council considers that in general the service is efficient but recognises that opportunities exist to improve efficiency particularly regarding the correct use (i.e.cultivation) of allotment plots. The Council is eager to see the formulation of effective Allotment Associations for all sites.

It is the Council's opinion that Allotment Associations could be more pro-active in managing their sites by contributing to maintenance and by applying to the National Association of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners for grants for Capital schemes.

The Council is able to carry out maintenance work by utilising its multifunctional workforce.

Is the service – Effective?

The service effectively delivers the opportunity for members of the Community to rent and cultivate plots. Active Allotment Associations, in the opinion of the Council, could positively impact upon the way the service is delivered and administered.

Is the service – Economical?

The service requires subsidy as can be seen from the financial data given below.

It should be noted that costs of Administration and direct labour are not apportioned to this service. Systems are now in place to monitor the supervisory and direct labour time attributed to this service.

FINANCIAL APPRAISAL

	Y/E 98/99	Y/E 99/00	Y/E 00/01
Income	£5,603	£6,897	£7,239
Expenditure *	£12,590	£8,052	£7,456
Net Cost	£6,987	£1,155	£217
No.of plots available	721	721	721
Net Cost per resident **	£0.368	£0.061	£0.011

* Excludes earmarked reserves

** used 19,000 population for all years

COMPARISONS - COMPARATIVE DATA-DECEMBER 2000

	SPENNYMOOR	SEAHAM	PETERLEE	HEMSWORTH
No. of Directly Managed Plots		178	Nil	7 Sites
No. of Association Managed Plots		316	All – not detailed	None
Monitoring arrangements		Annual site visits	Weekly/fortnightly visits	Site visits every 3 months
Would consider imposing different charges to non-residents		Yes	Yes	No
Improvement Programme		Rolling Programme	Yes	Yes
Performance Indicators Established		Yes	No	Yes
Income		£7,295	£500	£3,500
Cost Per User		£20.997	No Data	No Data
Net Cost of Service		£10,373	£3,800	£3,742
Cost Per Resident		£0.461	£0.17	£0.22

CHALLENGE

A purpose of Best Value is to challenge the status quo. The Review Committee began by challenging the way that the service is currently provided and considered the following challenging questions:-

1. *Is the provision of this service a statutory obligation?*

~~YES~~ / NO unless the parishioners so mandate

2. *Does the Council need to provide this service?*

Whilst there is generally no statutory obligation to provide this service the Committee unanimously agreed that it should be continued for the following reasons:-

- (a) The provision of the Allotment Service is clearly in demand by members of the Community as can be demonstrated by the take up of available sites.
- (b) It is the Council's policy to provide the Service at "reasonable prices" i.e. it is regarded as a community service.
- (c) The Service is accessible to all members of the Community. Allotment gardening provides a healthy outdoor leisure pursuit enabling participants to produce homegrown fruit and vegetables.

3. *Areas of innovation and emerging trends which have been identified include :-*

There is a reducing demand for Allotment plots primarily due to changes in the housing stock i.e. more houses with gardens less terraced houses coupled with the changing leisure pursuits of the young. Opportunities may exist to encourage demand for plots if, subject to a change in Council policy, sites could be let to leisure gardeners.

4. *How does the service contribute (directly or indirectly) to the Council's Statement of Purpose and other associated aims?*

The Council provides the service as a recreational facility for the well being of the community.

5. *The following possible areas of improvements / enhancements have been identified.*

- (a) The establishment of pro-active Allotment Associations.
- (b) The enforcement of cultivation rules to improve site environments reducing eyesores.
- (c) Given the reducing demand for plots the Council may in future look to formulate a strategy for site rationalisation and consolidation
- (d) Leisure gardening, requiring a change in Council policy, could positively impact upon the demand for allotment plots.

6. *Why is the service provided by the current provider and in the current way / form?*

The service is performed “in - house” for the following reasons:-

- (a) A clear demand for this service exists albeit reducing. The service requires subsidy from the Council to operate in its current form. The Council are of the opinion that an External provider, if such a provider could be found, would require the achievement of a financial return. This would result in a need to increase plot rentals to such an extent that certain members of the community would be precluded from benefiting from this activity.
- (b) The Council is able to minimise costs by using the services of its multi-trained/multi-skilled workforce to carry out inspections and maintenance of its Allotment sites.
- (c) The Council is of the opinion that this service, if in the control of external sources, would be liable to be withdrawn.

7. *Should the Council consider externalising the service provision?*

As previously mentioned The Council do not consider Externalisation to be a feasible option. The Council do however approve of divesting some of its day to day responsibilities to approved and established Allotment Associations in accordance with its membership of the N.S.A.L.G..

OVERVIEW – STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT.

(i) *Does the service meet the Council's current aims/objectives*

YES / ~~NO~~

The review Committee was unanimous in their opinion that the service was meeting set aims and objectives whilst at the same time recognising opportunities to improve in the areas of efficiency and economy.

The Committee noted that since the introduction of Best Value, systems and procedures had been implemented to better monitor:-

- (a) The way in which the service is being provided
- (b) Use of manpower resources
- (c) Customer feed-back
- (d) Usage - monitoring by means of regular surveys levels of cultivation

(ii) *Service Expansion/Contraction*

The Council believes that demand for Allotment plots will continue to fall, indicated as a national trend, and as such will need to formulate a strategy to deal with an excess of supply over demand.

(iii) Does the Council consider the provision of the service to be a strategic priority.

YES / ~~NO~~

The Council is committed to enhancing the quality of life of its residents and intends to maintain the service provision and to make any necessary improvements as identified in this Best Value Review.

The Council believes that the implementation of the recommendations following the Best Value Review will positively impact upon the service areas of quality efficiency and financial performance.

SERVICE IMPROVEMENT – ACTION PLAN

The Review Committee takes opportunity to point out that certain areas, identified as potential weaknesses, were improved upon during the course of the Review process.

- Inspection surveys
- Logging of manpower resource usage(supervisory and direct)
- Customer feed-back on quality
- Cultivation enforcement
- Establishment of a rolling Capital programme (toilets, water supply, road, fencing and disabled facilities)
- Public meeting between allotment holders and the Council
- Encourage involvement from schools and Community rangers

1. Promote the establishment of Allotment Associations
2. Continue to enforce cultivation
3. Formulate strategy to deal with falling demand i.e. site rationalisation/consolidation,leisure gardening
4. Look to improve upon site aesthetics
5. Promote applications for grant funding for site improvements.
6. Question our Policy re leisure gardening.
7. Question our letting fees for tenants living outside the Council boundaries.

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APPENDIX 1

PUBLIC FEED-BACK AND QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

The review and analysis of the response to our general questionnaire provided the following results:-

ALLOTMENTS	yes	no			
Does anyone in your household rent an allotment?	5	86			
How do you rate the facilities at your allotment site	1	2	3	4	5
1 = Excellent, 2 = V.Good, 3 = Good, 4 = Average, 5 = Poor	2	1	1	1	1
What would you suggest to improve the facilities provided at the allotment site?	res	n/r			
	4	87			

res = response

n/r = no response

Common responses

- Sites should be tidied up
- Fencing and pathways require improvement
- Improved drainage

APPENDIX 2

**SPECIFIC QUESTIONNAIRE SUPPLIED TO ALL ALLOTMENT TENANTS
SPENNYMOOR TOWN COUNCIL**

ALLOTMENT HOLDERS SURVEY 2001

Tell us what you think

The answers you give will be used to judge how well the Council is doing and to plan improvements for the future.

Allotment site: Plot No.....

How do you rate the facilities?

Excellent / Good / Average / Poor

How do you think the facilities could be approved?

Would you be prepared to see the allotment charges increase to cover costs of improvements?

Yes / No

Would you be prepared to attend a public meeting to discuss matters relating to your Allotment site?

Yes / No

Name _____

Address _____

APPENDIX 3
RESPONSES TO THE SPECIFIC QUESTIONNAIRE

RESULTS NOT YET AVAILABLE