

CHESHAM TOWN COUNCIL

BEST VALUE SERVICE REVIEWS – YEAR ONE

ALLOTMENTS

1. Review Group

- 1.1 A Review Group was appointed by the Best Value Panel on 8 May 2000. The members of the group are:

Councillor Mrs. J.A. Barratt, Chesham Town Council
Mr. R. Ayres, Parks & Premises Manager
Mr. M.W. Kennedy, Town Clerk
Mr. V. Crompton, Allotment Holder
Mrs. L. Mountain, Duke of Bedford Trust

2. Review Timetable

- 2.1 The Allotments Committee discussed opportunities for improving the management of the Council owned allotment sites at Amersham Road, Asheridge Road and Cameron Road on **29 November 1999, Min. No. 8**. As a consequence of Council's decision to investigate alternative management regimes, including control by Chesham & District Horticultural and Allotment Holders' Association, and with the implementation of Best Value from 1 April 2000, it was decided that this service should be included in year one of the Review timetable.
- 2.2 The Review Group met on 25 May and 22 June and the notes of these meetings are reproduced as **Appendix 1**. The report was approved by the Group on 27 November.

3. Assessment of Current Service Provision

Legislation

- 3.1 Under Section 23 of the Small Holdings Allotments Act 1908, a Local Council is required to provide allotment gardens for personal cultivation where it is of the opinion that a demand exists in the parish. Moreover, under that Section, a Local Council must take into consideration any written representations for the provision of allotments made to it by any six parliamentary electors or council tax payers resident in the parish.
- 3.2 More recent legislation relating to allotments is contained in the following Acts of Parliament:
- Allotments Act 1922
 - Allotments Act 1925
 - Allotments Act 1950
 - Local Government Planning and Land Act 1990, Section 1 (5) and Schedules 5 and 34.

Background Information

- 3.3 No precise meaning is given to the term "allotment" in the legislation. It is used to refer to any separate parcel of land which is let out for cultivation. The expression allotments includes field gardens, fuel allotments, allotment gardens and land of not more than five acres cultivated as a farm or garden or partly one or the other.
- 3.4 Most Local Authority allotments in practice fall within the definition of an allotment garden contained in Section 22 (1) of the Allotments Act 1922 which is an allotment not exceeding one-quarter of an acre in extent which is wholly or mainly cultivated by the occupier for the production of vegetables or fruit crops for consumption by himself or his family. It cannot be land used for the purposes of trade or business.
- 3.5 Allotments, including allotment gardens, are treated as agricultural land for the purposes of exemption from domestic rating. In addition, a Local Council may delegate its powers and duties under the Allotment Acts other than a power to raise a rate or borrow money to an Allotments Committee.
- 3.6 Such a committee may comprise persons other than elected Members of the Council who are experienced in the management and cultivation of allotments and representative of the interests of the allotment tenants. Chesham Town Council's Allotments Committee comprises seven elected Members and four co-opted members nominated by the Chesham & District Horticultural and Allotment Holders' Association.
- 3.7 All statutory allotment land, that is land purchased or appropriated specifically for allotment purposes, must not be sold without the consent of the Secretary of State (Allotments Act 1925, Section 8). The Authority must also be of the opinion that the land is no longer required for allotments or that more suitable land is available. The power of disposal includes a power to exchange land and to pay or receive money for equality of exchange, subject also to the need to obtain the Secretary of State's consent.
- 3.8 Policy R12 of the Chiltern District Local Plan deals specifically with loss of allotments throughout the district. The Council will not permit the change of use of allotments to any other purpose unless specific criteria are met (*see pages 238-9 of the adopted Chiltern District Local Plan September 1997*). Given the District Council's resistance to accept a change of use of allotment land, unless there is clear evidence of a lack of demand and that significant efforts have been made to let the land, and the requirement to obtain the consent of the Secretary of State, it is considered unlikely that the provision of allotment gardens by this Authority will change significantly in the next five years.

Current Service Provision

- 3.9 Allotments are provided in Chesham at the following places and a location plan is shown as **Appendix 2**:
- Amersham Road – owned and managed by Chesham Town Council (non-statutory allotments)
 - Asheridge Road – owned and managed by Chesham Town Council (statutory allotments)
 - Bois Moor Road – owned and managed by the Duke of Bedford Trust (non-statutory allotments)
 - Cameron Road – owned and managed by Chesham Town Council (statutory allotments)

- Moor Road – Lakeside Corporation Limited (non-statutory allotments)
- Wey Lane – Mr. G. Piggin (non-statutory allotments)

3.10 The Council's strategic service objective is:

- to provide allotments where a demand exists, in keeping with our statutory obligation.

4. Current Level of Service

4.1 The basic administration and collection of allotment rents is undertaken by staff at the Town Council. The Council issue formal tenancy agreements based on the guidelines issued by the National Association of Local Councils. The day to day supervision and management of the three allotment sites is undertaken by the Parks & Premises Manager and his staff.

4.2 The total number of lettable plots is as follows:

LOCATION	NO. OF PLOTS
Amersham Road	4
Asheridge Road	39
Cameron Road	160
Total No. of Lettable Plots	203

4.3 There are currently 27 vacant plots, the majority of which are at Cameron Road.

5. Consultation

5.1 The Chesham Survey 2000, inviting residents to comment on the services provided by the Town Council, was sent to every Chesham household in March. By 31 May, 1,462 replies were received and analysed by Summit Services Limited, a 17.3% response rate.

5.2 Section 3 of the Questionnaire deals specifically with allotments and an extract from the responses to the questions is reproduced as **Appendix 3**.

5.3 It is pleasing to note that 75% of responses are aware that the Town Council has allotments to rent while 95% of those replied rate the facilities provided fair or better.

5.4 A small number of user surveys took place during the summer months at the Asheridge Road and Cameron Road sites involving face-to-face interviews with allotment holders. The results of this survey are reproduced as **Appendix 4**.

5.5 Although only 14 interviews were conducted, this nevertheless represents a 9% sample of the total number of tenanted plots from which a number of interesting observations were found. For example, 71% would be prepared to pay a higher rent for their plot while a similar percentage identified overgrowing adjoining plots as being the least enjoyable feature of the site.

6. **SWOT Analysis**

6.1 The following strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats are identified:

Strengths

- ❑ the Town Council has a statutory obligation to provide this service
- ❑ responsive Town Council
- ❑ there is a demand for this service
- ❑ low rents
- ❑ socially inclusive
- ❑ environmentally friendly
- ❑ encourages social interaction

Weaknesses

- ❑ low publicity is given to this service
- ❑ there is a higher age dependency
- ❑ not inter-related to other services
- ❑ low rents

Opportunities

- ❑ improving and strengthening management regime with Allotments Association
- ❑ linking in partnership with Local Agenda 21 initiatives

Threats

- ❑ increase in management costs
- ❑ increasing number of vacant plots

7. **Assessment of Competitiveness**

- 7.1 The Review Group considered the current service provision and addressed whether the Council is providing an efficient and effective service. Opportunities for passing control of the Council's allotment sites to the Allotment Holders' Association for management were explored. While this arrangement works successfully in other Authorities, the Association did not feel able to undertake this work effectively, in the absence of committed volunteers, at this present time.
- 7.2 The Review Group consider that, generally speaking, the Council has an extremely flexible workforce. This is primarily due to their small numbers and relevant experience and skills, particularly when dealing with major maintenance work such as waterpipe repairs and fencing work. Unless the Allotments Association decide to bid to administer the service, then the only viable alternative is for the Council to continue to manage this function as part of its statutory duties. Chiltern District Council does not own nor manage allotments and are therefore unlikely to want to take over responsibility for the management of the Town Council's sites.

8. **Monitoring Arrangements**

- 8.1 The service is monitored by the Allotments Committee of the Town Council. Day to day management is undertaken by the Town Council's Parks & Premises Team.
- 8.2 The Allotments Committee meet each year and inspect the Cameron Road and Asheridge Road sites to ensure plots are being properly cultivated by tenants. Where plots are partly cultivated, overgrown or neglected, letters are sent to tenants advising them of their breach in the Tenancy Agreement.

9. **Performance Targets**

- 9.1 The only target set by the Council in the current year is to undertake a Best Value Performance Review of the service. This has been set for year one acknowledging that allotments is the only statutory responsibility for Local Councils and, therefore, it will hopefully be easy in year one to find comparative information for benchmarking purposes.
- 9.2 Although the service is relatively low key in the Council's portfolio of activities, it is nevertheless the sole statutory responsibility and interacts with the Council's objectives in respect of sustainability and the provision of quality, efficient and cost effective services. It is also available to lower income groups to help create a socially inclusive and caring community and also linked in with the bigger picture of Local Agenda 21, sustainability and environmental issues.

10. **Comparisons**

- 10.1 The Review Group has obtained benchmarking comparisons with other Best Value Local Authorities as set out in **Appendix 5**.

11. **Performance Indicators**

- 11.1 The following performance indicators for this service are:

PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	TARGET	ACTUAL
Cost to the Council per elector	£0.26	£0.33
Cost to the Council per Band D property	£0.52	£0.66
Income to Council per hectare of workable allotment land	£338.15	£303.50
Percentage satisfaction taken from questionnaire	70%	94%
Percentage awareness taken from questionnaire	70%	75%
Percentage of uncultivated allotment land	15%	15.8%

- 11.2 It has not been possible to gather performance indicators from other service providers to compare Chesham's service with Best Value Town and Parish Councils because accounting guidance notes have still to be drawn up.

12. **Service Delivery**

12.1 In common with many Town and Parish Councils, the provision of allotments is a low key in-house role involving infrequent liaison with the Allotments Association and our tenants. Opportunities for transferring management either to the Allotment Holders' Association or to the Duke of Bedford Trust have been explored but are not supported at this time. Nevertheless, the Review Group suggest that further work in partnering with the Allotment Holders' Association should be carried out next year towards creating an Asheridge Road Allotment Holders' Association. This is put forward as a key target for 2001/02.

12.2 The overall service is provided in-house by the Town Council who are responsible for the following tasks:

- ❑ grass cutting main pathways through the allotment sites
- ❑ hedge cutting
- ❑ fence repairs
- ❑ repairs to water pipes, water butts and taps
- ❑ clear overgrown allotments twice a year

12.3 Major works are out-sourced, for example, laying a new water main to the Cameron Road Allotment Site.

13. **Financial Appraisal**

13.1 The cost to the Town Council in managing its three allotment sites in 1999/2000 was £5,308. The cost of service is shown below:

	£	£	£
<u>Expenditure</u>			
Water charges	2,327		
Grounds maintenance	140		
Wages	1,404		
Central Admin charges	2,125		
Capital Charges	<u>406</u>		
Total expenditure		6,402	
<u>Income</u>			
Allotment rents	1,048		
Wayleaves	<u>46</u>		
Total Income		<u>1,094</u>	
Net expenditure for 1999/2000			<u>£5,308</u>

13.2 A comparison for the last three years which includes an adjustment for Capital charges, is shown overleaf:

YEAR	COST OF SERVICE
1999/00	£5,308
1998/99	£4,308
1997/98	£2,627

- 13.3 Allotment rents are reviewed each year by the Allotments Committee. The current charging period coincides with the financial year and rents are due on 1 April each year.
- 13.4 The Review Group strongly recommend to the Allotments Committee that the rent period should be changed from 1 April to 1 October. This will allow new tenants time to clear plots which may be overgrown and prepare the ground before the growing season begins, rather than the Council waiting until the annual inspection of plots takes place in June before discovering uncultivated plots that have not been worked since the beginning of the season. By the time the Council has issued a notice to quit, the growing season is well underway presenting very little incentive for prospective tenants to take up vacant plots.
- 13.5 The Review Group strongly recommend to the Allotments Committee a substantial increase in allotment rents from 2001 to cover the additional resources identified in paragraph 14.5 below required to improve the standard of service delivery next year.
14. **Assessment of options for improving the service**
- 14.1 Responding to the challenge aspect of Best Value, the Review Group perceive that there is a statutory duty to provide allotments and there is a demand from town residents. On this basis it is essential that this service be provided. Clearly allotments must be provided on land which is suitable for growing produce. Such land must be central to the town and in easy reach of local residents. The allotment's allocation and suitability for this purpose is ideal as it stands at the moment.
- 14.2 Whilst there is demand from local residents, the provision of allotments will continue because the Council has a legal obligation to satisfy this need. The Review Group wish to explore the feasibility of providing additional allotments in other parts of Chesham.
- 14.3 As the Town Council has a statutory duty to provide allotment gardens, it is not considered that any alternative exists. It is not anticipated that any other provider will be attracted to provide a service due to high land values and the low income return. This was demonstrated in 1996 by the sale at public auction of the London Underground allotment land in Moor Road. The purchaser, believed to have bought the land for speculative capital gain with a view to building houses has applied, unsuccessfully, for voluntary liquidation. The site is still being worked by LU's former tenants, rent free.
- 14.4 The Review Group believes that the service provided by Chesham Town Council is effective, efficient and economic and represents value for money. This is confirmed by the positive results from Chesham Survey 2000.
- 14.5 However, a particular area for improvement involving the need for greater attention to uncultivated and vacant plots has been identified and additional resources will be targeted to improve the standard of service delivery next year. Opportunities for creating a 'Friends of Cameron Road Allotments' including self management by tenants, will also be explored and targeted next year.

14.6 A database of allotment holders will be set up and publication of *The Grower* newsletter re-introduced from 2001.

15. **Service Improvement Plan**

15.1 The Review Group has identified a five year phased plan for improved service delivery – see **Appendix 6**.

16. **Continuous Review**

16.1 The Best Value Panel will re-examine its objectives in delivery of service within the preparation of the annual Best Value Performance Plan.

16.2 The Council will look to establish an allotments forum to discuss the needs of our tenants. Such a forum would hopefully evolve into a Friends Group and ultimately tenants' associations who could be willing to undertake administration and maintenance.

16.3 The production of *The Grower* newsletter will be used as the vehicle for conducting surveys and consulting users about our performance. From this the Council will provide an annual Allotment Service Report for presentation to tenants at the annual forum. This on-going process of consultation and information will ensure continuous service improvement.

Mike Kennedy
Town Clerk

24.11.00