

# **Allotments**

## **- A Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

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## Foreword

The process that led to this report was initiated by the Association of Lancaster & Morecambe Allotments (ALMA) and the North West Counties Association of Allotments and Leisure Gardeners (NWCAA).

Representatives from these two organisations wrote to the City Council to request a meeting to discuss the management of local allotment sites. They were invited to address the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee in July 2004, and the Committee set up an informal group to investigate the matter further and make recommendations.

This report summarises the group's findings, demonstrating the benefits of allotments to healthy living in the Lancaster District, and making a case for increased support from the City Council and its partners. The recommendations in the report were considered and approved by the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee in December 2004.

Cllr. J.R Mace  
Chairman Overview and  
Scrutiny Committee

# 1 Introduction

Plants are not the only things that are nurtured on allotments. Community spirit, healthy lifestyles and an appreciation of our environment are all cultivated too! Allotments are wonderful places – where people of all ages and backgrounds can get some exercise, have a natter, soak up the sun and listen to birdsong, at the same time as growing good food, which won't have to travel far.

It has been many years since the Council last had a good look at allotments and how they are managed. So we welcomed this opportunity to roll up our sleeves and start digging through the evidence to find out how we could do things better.

I hope that this report will be the beginning of a more fruitful relationship between the Council and local Allotment Associations; making the best use of the resources that each has to offer.

Councillor Emily Heath  
Lead Member  
Allotments Working Group

## **2 Summary of Recommendations**

### **Recommendation 1**

- a) That the Council recognises the vital role that allotments can play in promoting health, well-being and biodiversity and as contributory elements towards the objectives of the Corporate Plan, Community Strategy and Sustainable Development (LA 21) strategy.
- b) That the Council seeks to secure more support for allotments and local food initiatives, both from within the Council and through local partnerships in accordance with this recommendation.
- c) That where possible, and in partnership with Allotments Associations (AA's), the Council helps to seek funding from grants, Section 106 money and Landfill Tax Credits to support the development of allotments.

### **Recommendation 2**

That the Council confirms and ensures that all allotment sites within the district are afforded protection under the Local Development Framework.

### **Recommendation 3**

That the Council views allotments as essential community resources, not simply as property assets, and that the Council's Environmental Co-ordinator helps to promote allotments, and create or strengthen links with corporate policies, the Wildlife Forum, Food Forum and Recycling Forum.

### **Recommendation 4**

That the Council instigates a review of allotment leases in two years in partnership with ALMA in order to consider issues including:

- ❑ Leisure Garden
- ❑ Sale of Surplus Goods
- ❑ Community Gardens
- ❑ Placing allotments in trust

and that this should include full consultation with all stakeholders including AA's and tenants on any emerging proposals.

### **Recommendation 5**

- (a) That the Council designates a lead officer for allotment enquiries, advice and support to community groups who wish to establish new or enlarged allotment sites within the Lancaster District and that in the absence of the expertise or capacity to provide such support directly, the Council refers groups to alternative sources of support (e.g. Council for Voluntary Services)

- (b) That Cabinet encourages and supports officers in obtaining funding for the “Local Growth” project as a contributory element towards objective 1.(m) of the Community Strategy.

**Recommendation 6**

That the Council consider using Section 106 money to provide allotment facilities in areas of high demand and secure a sum of money to assist with the ongoing running and maintenance costs of such sites.

**Recommendation 7**

That the Council in conjunction with ALMA organises a District-Wide Allotments Forum (including rural and privately owned allotments) twice per year to enable information and ideas to be shared, and issues of concern to be discussed and addressed.

**Recommendation 8**

That ALMA be asked to assist the Council through providing AA contact details for the Council’s website, and liaising with the Council on behalf of AA’s.

**Recommendation 9**

That ALMA be recommended to become a properly constituted organisation and investigate becoming an environmental organisation for the purposes of receiving and distributing funding from Land Fill Tax.

**Recommendation 10**

That the Council reduces lease fees from the financial year 2005/06 onwards to a breakeven level, reapportioning the surplus by acreage, to AAs to enable them to spend more of their income from plot rental on site maintenance and running costs.

**Recommendation 11**

That the Council’s Environmental Co-ordinator be asked to help ALMA to take advantage of internal and external funding opportunities – e.g. by passing on information about available grants.

## 3 The role of the Allotments Group

### 3.1 Terms of Reference

The group worked to the following terms of reference:

To review current and future allotment provision in the Lancaster District with regard to best practice nationally, including:

- Self-management models
- Relationship between the Council and Allotment Associations (AAs)
- Leases, incomes and budgets
- Maintenance
- Waste management
- Development plans for Allotment Associations

### 3.2 Membership of the Group

The group comprised of Councillors Emily Heath, Peter Robinson and Gareth Millar, and Association of Lancaster & Morecambe Allotments (ALMA) representatives John Lambert (Fairfield AA & Acting Chair of ALMA), Tom Jones (Torrisholme Road AA) and Linda Secker (Dorrington Road AA), with administrative support from the Principal Democratic Support Officer James Doble.

The group gratefully acknowledges the contributions and evidence freely given by:

- Daniel Mountford (North West Counties Association of Allotments and Leisure Gardeners).
- Claire Drury (Local Food Development Co-ordinator, Morecambe Bay Primary Care Trust)
- Cllr Stuart Langhorn (Lancaster City Council & Caton-with-Littledale Parish Council)
- Graham Cox (Head of Property Services, Lancaster City Council)
- Joy Grayson (Environmental Co-ordinator, Lancaster City Council)
- Jenny Loydall (Waste & Cleansing Manager, Lancaster City Council)
- Paul Cocker (Grounds Maintenance Operations Manager, Lancaster City Council)

### 3.3 Timetable of Meetings

<b>Date of meeting</b>	<b>Who gave evidence?</b>	<b>Issues scrutinised</b>
23.08.04	Graham Cox	Number of allotment sites, lease arrangements, budget.
01.09.04	ALMA & NWCAA	Allotment management models, examples of best

		practice from elsewhere in NW.
15.09.04	Joy Grayson	How allotments fit in with LA21 Agenda for Action
18.10.04	Claire Drury Councillor Stuart Langhorn	Local food initiatives (e.g. 5-a-day and Food Forum). Need for a new allotment site in Caton.
1.11.04	Paul Cocker	How CCS may be able to help allotments and possible sources of future funding.

### 3.4 Documentary Evidence Considered

- NWCAA Review of Allotment Provision 2003 – comparison between Lancaster and other Councils, including Preston (Beacon Council) and Blackburn.
- “Allotments: a Plot Holders Guide” – Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions.
- “Devolved management for Allotments: Models and Processes” (briefing by Richard Wiltshire for the LGA Working Group on a best practice regime for allotments, 1998)
- “Allotments – Can You Dig It” – draft allotments strategy for Blackpool 2004
- Example of a local lease agreement.
- Lancaster City Council Budget Book 2004/05.
- “Agenda for Action – a strategy for sustainable development in the Lancaster District”, Sustainability (LA 21) Partnership, 2003.
- “Community Strategy - life in the Lancaster District: a vision for 2020”, Local Strategic Partnership, 2003.
- “Get Growing - a guide to developing community food growing projects in the Lancaster District”, Clare Drury, 2004.
- Biodiversity Action Plan, Lancashire Wildlife Trust
- Lancaster City Council Parks and Open Spaces Strategy

## 4 Status of this Report

This report is the work of the Allotments Working Group, on behalf of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and where opinions are expressed they are not necessarily those of the Lancaster City Council

Whilst we have sought to draw on this review to make recommendations and suggestions that our helpful to the Council, our work has been designed solely for the purpose of discharging our work in accordance with the terms of reference agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Accordingly, our work cannot be relied upon to identify every area of strength, weakness or opportunity for improvement.

This report is addressed to the Cabinet of the Lancaster City Council. It has been prepared for the sole use of the Council and the Committee take no responsibility



for any Member or Officer acting in their individual capacities or to other third parties acting on it.

## 5 Background and Context

There are 12 City Council owned allotment sites of various sizes in the Lancaster District, totalling approximately 536 full-sized plots (Table 1). Nine are in Lancaster, while Torrisholme, Morecambe and Carnforth each have one allotment site. There are also some small privately owned sites, e.g. in Hornby and Halton.

**Table 1: Data for Allotment Sites in the Lancaster District, 2004**

Allotment site	No. of plots	Acres	Lease fee £ pa (with concs)	No. of concs./ unlet plots	Rent per plot £ pa	Net income to AA £ pa	Issues
Dorrington Road, Greaves, Lancaster	53	3.73	973 (766)	23 / 6	29	505	Vandalism Theft Boundaries harassment
Barley Cop Lane, Skerton, Lancaster	44	3.37	1,012 (767)	20 / 7	22	27*	
Torrisholme Road, Torrisholme	44	3.22	869 (712)	16 / 4.5	30	409	Vandalism Rubbish disposal boundaries
Highfield, Freehold, Lancaster	52	3.81	999 (772)	31 / 5	25	279	
Devonshire Road, Morecambe	63	4.06	1,043 (925)	28 / 0			
Highfield, Carnforth	12	1.06	276 (243)	8 / 0	17	-71*	
Cork Road, Bowerham, Lancaster	84	6.59	1,829 (1,464)	40 / 9	26	326	Toilets Boundaries rubbish
Shrewsbury Drive, Bowerham, Lancaster	43	3.59	936 (738)	11 / 4	24	154	Fly tipping 4 plots unusable. Boundaries Vandalism Rubbish
Scotforth Cemetery, Scotforth	19	1.35	360 (284)	18 / 0	20	24*	Fences Toilets Water

							distribution
Bridge Road, Greaves, Lancaster	12	0.50	136 (124)	0 / 1	25	275	Access Boundary weed control rubbish
Fairfield, Lancaster	57	4.40	1,135 (1,008)	30 / 0	35	867	Long waiting list Tractor access Vandalism Boundaries Rubbish
John O' Gaunt, Primrose, Lancaster	53	2.31	647 (580)	13 / 1	36	1243	Boundaries Maintenance
TOTALS	536	37.99	10,215 (8,383)				

\* = Estimated (Data obtained from ALMA)

Since the late 1980's and early 1990's all sites have been self-managed by the Allotment Associations (AAs), who lease the land from the City Council. It should be noted that the City Council has a passive role with regard to allotments. Currently the Council has no Allotments Officer, with a responsibility to promote, develop or provide guidance on allotments or to assist groups of individuals who are interested in setting up an allotment either through invoking the powers of the Allotments Act or otherwise.

The Council is responsible for collecting lease fees and providing contact details of AAs to enquiries.

AAs are responsible for everything else (e.g. maintenance, site security, insurance, utilities, plot lettings and rent collection, enforcement issues, waiting lists, information and advice, consent for structures, etc). A significant amount of unpaid time is spent by AA committee members on administration and fundraising activities.

Leases are for 10 years and payments vary according to acreage, with discounts for plots which are unlet or rented by concessionaires (e.g. benefits claimants). Lease levels are adjusted every 3 years in line with the Retail Price Index.

Each AA decides plot sizes and rent levels. Many plots are split into halves, and it is common for two people to share the responsibility for a half-sized plot. Several sites are fully let and operate waiting lists.

ALMA was set up in 2004, and represents all 12 sites (although Devonshire Road has not yet nominated representatives). ALMA's remit is likely to evolve in parallel with the development of this strategy.

ALMA estimates that at least 1500 people are involved in tending allotments in the Lancaster District, with plots often having multiple occupancy and usage by more than one member of the same family.

## 6 Findings

### 6.1 Status of allotments as contributory elements to the Community Strategy, Corporate Plan and Sustainability (LA 21) Strategy

Allotments are important for many reasons – they provide open space, a habitat for wildlife, opportunities for recreation, socialising, exercise and life-long learning, and a source of affordable and healthy food. They are a particularly valuable resource for people who do not have their own garden.

Whilst allotments are not mentioned explicitly within the Corporate Plan, they would appear to fit with High level Actions 11 and 16 as set out below:

- ❑ Increasing the number of people participating in the Council’s leisure programmes and increasing the number and range of facilities available.
- ❑ Protecting and enhancing the environmental wealth and bio-diversity of our District.

The Community Strategy (the key policy document for agencies working together in the district) and the blueprint for the Local Strategic Partnership includes two distinct elements that allotments could potentially help deliver:

1. (m) **Access to affordable, nutritious and safe foods by:**
  - ❑ Improving access to local community shops that sell good quality and range of affordable food including fresh fruit and vegetables, through initiatives such as the Food Forum Action Plan.
  - ❑ Integrating food skills (shopping, growing, cooking) in to learning activities and programmes, both curricular and extra-curricular activity and popularising healthy food and snacks.

The Community Strategy (p12) notes that “there is much interest in the provision of high quality food, demonstrated by the popularity of street food markets and a number of initiatives aimed at expanding access to allotments and healthy eating projects”. The strategy contains a target to increase the number of fruit and vegetable schemes implemented by 2006.

Allotments contribute to several Sustainability (LA 21) goals, especially those in the Agenda For Action chapters entitled ‘Taking Part’, ‘Local Food Matters’, and ‘Protecting Wildlife and Landscapes’.

Unfortunately, the links between these key strategies and allotments do not appear to be highlighted to date and the group would like them not only to be acknowledged but viewed as important contributory elements towards the

achievement of these strategies, their profile raised and their future development considered by the Council in a proactive way.

The group met with Claire Drury who is employed by the Morecambe Bay PCT as a Local Food Co-ordinator (until June 2005). She has been working with local schools to promote the “5-a-day” scheme, develop school and community growing schemes, and support the Sustainability Partnership’s Food Forum, which is currently focusing on developing local farmers’ markets. There is potential to involve AAs in community growing schemes and local fruit and veg initiatives. However, allotment leases currently prohibit the sale of surplus produce and the growing of fruit trees.

Many AAs and individual plot-holders are promoting organic growing methods and other wildlife friendly practices such as complimentary planting and composting to name but two. There is also potential for more to be done in this area, e.g. by having hedges instead of fences, more ponds and wild areas, and allowing beekeeping on sites. Consideration should therefore be given to the role of allotments in the Biodiversity Action Plan and the Council’s Parks and Open Spaces strategy.

#### **Recommendation 1**

- a) That the Council recognises the vital role that allotments can play in promoting health, well-being and biodiversity and as contributory elements towards the objectives of the Corporate Plan, Community Strategy and Sustainable Development (LA 21) strategy.
- b) That the Council seeks to secure more support for allotments and local food initiatives, both from within the Council and through local partnerships in accordance with this recommendation.
- c) That where possible, and in partnership with Allotments Associations (AA’s), the Council helps to seek funding from grants, Section 106 money and Landfill Tax Credits to support the development of allotments.

It is the belief of the group that the allotments under the care of the City Council are composed of both statutory and non-statutory allotments. The Panel is concerned that particularly in light of the perceived demand that these allotments both statutory and non-statutory are afforded protection under the Council’s Local Development Framework as important community facilities.

#### **Recommendation 2**

That the Council confirms and ensures that all allotment sites within the district are afforded protection under the Local Development Framework.

## **6.2 Status of allotments within Lancaster City Council, the Council’s role and leases**

The Council's relationship with AAs is currently based on a formal landlord-tenant arrangement, with little proactive promotion and support.

AAs are broadly happy with the principle of self-management, but they are very concerned about their lack of resources. In particular they are struggling to meet the day-to-day running costs and the costs of maintaining secure site boundaries.

AAs feel that allotments should not be viewed simply as 'property'. They should be recognised as important community resources. Similarly, AAs should not be viewed simply as 'tenants', but recognised as voluntary/community groups who have a lot of goodwill and commitment, but limited resources to meet their many responsibilities.

### **Recommendation 3**

That the Council views allotments as essential community resources, not simply as property assets, and that the Council's Environmental Co-ordinator helps to promote allotments, and create or strengthen links with corporate policies, the Wildlife Forum, Food Forum and Recycling Forum.

Additionally there was concern that the current lease employed by the Council did not reflect this special status that allotments have as community resources as opposed to mere property assets. For instance there remains much discussion over whether consideration should be given to allow 'leisure gardens' within the lease for people who want to use a plot for this purpose. Additionally there does appear to be some overly restrictive regulations governing current usage. For instance as a criteria for many grant applications at least part of the site must be open to the public, yet leases appear to prohibit the creation of a 'community allotment' or leisure garden.

Currently it is against the terms of leases for an AA to cultivate a plot and sell the produce in aid of the society to financially contribute towards its objectives. This same restriction also applies to individual holders selling surplus stock in aid of their Association; with the effect of preventing the creation of badly needed funds and more locally produced food being available for consumption.

Allotments are legally defined as areas not exceeding 40 pole used wholly or mainly by the occupier for the production of vegetable or fruit crops for consumption by the allotment holder or their family, although the group has heard that it is now accepted by many local authorities that this does not prevent the sale of surplus produce, especially where this can raise an income.

ALMA has informed the group that the Government in its response to the 1998 Select Committee enquiry confirmed that 'current legislation already enables some limited commercial activity to take place on allotments, but primary legislation would be required would be required to allow commercial use to be greater than ancillary use'.

The group also became aware of the difficulties that Allotment Associations faced in terms of bidding for funds for work such as perimeter fences. Often funding was rejected as funders believed that responsibility lay with the Council as landlord and

would not accept that the responsibility was devolved to the Allotment Associations. This further emphasises the discrepancy between the Council receiving money from leases and yet not carrying out any maintenance requiring this to be done by the AA's.

The group considered whether it might assist this issue if the Council considered placing allotments 'in trust' to a not for profit organisation with charitable intent, which ALMA may possibly become as it develops.

In light of this there was consensus amongst the group that a review of allotment leases should take place and that this should figure within the Service Business Plan for Property Services.

#### **Recommendation 4**

That the Council instigates a review of allotment leases in two years in partnership with ALMA in order to consider issues including:

- Leisure Garden
- Sale of Surplus Goods
- Community Gardens
- Placing allotments in trust

and that this should include full consultation with all stakeholders including AA's and tenants on any emerging proposals.

### **6.3 Unmet demand for allotments**

There appears to be unmet demand for allotments in various parts of the District. For example, Fairfield AA has a long waiting list, and may soon want to consider expanding the site – perhaps into adjacent Council-owned land. Morecambe has only one allotment site, which is also fully let with a waiting list. There are currently no Council-owned allotment sites in the rural parts of the District, with the exception of the small site at Highfield in Carnforth, which is fully let.

Caton-with-Littledale Parish Council has identified 36 people who would like to have an allotment in the Caton area. Unfortunately Caton's allotment site was compulsorily purchased for new housing many years ago. The Parish Council recently invoked the Allotment Act to initiate a search for a new site and the possible future compulsory purchase. Two potential sites have been identified (both church-owned). The Parish Council has sought advice and support from the City Council but felt that the response was not as helpful as it could have been, particularly in terms of how to invoke the Act and how to go about achieving their aim.

Therefore the group feel that there should be a clear lead officer identified to promote and assist with the development of allotment provision. It is suggested that one suitable area where clear synergies already exist is as an element of the Sustainability (LA 21) strategy and as such the Environmental Co-ordinator could provide a better service working with Property and Legal Services. The group also note with interest that the Environmental Co-ordinator when giving evidence indicated that a successful application, was made some time ago to the

Lancashire Environment Fund to part fund a post to co-ordinate a project entitled “Local Growth” to work with and encourage the public to grow more fruit and vegetables. The group were keen that Cabinet support this issue and encourage Officers to find other funding to establish this post, which could be directed into an allotment development worker focusing on local food and bio-diversity issues.

#### **Recommendation 5**

- a) That the Council designates a lead officer for allotment enquiries, advice and support to community groups who wish to establish new or enlarged allotment sites within the Lancaster District and that in the absence of the expertise or capacity to provide such support directly, the Council refers groups to alternative sources of support (e.g. Council for Voluntary Services)
- b) That Cabinet encourages and supports officers in obtaining funding for the “Local Growth” project as a contributory element towards objective 1.(m) of the Community Strategy.

The group feel that allotments provide a significant community facility that help to offset the impact of the built environment. In light of this, the group feel that there is potential for the provision of allotments to be considered as a legitimate call on Section 106 monies, which are provided by developers to offset the impact of development within a given area. It is commonplace for contributions for traffic calming, affordable housing etc. but there is also the possibility of providing Section 106 money for off site provision of public open space, playgrounds or allotment provision provided with an investment fund to cover running costs.

#### **Recommendation 6**

That the Council consider using Section 106 money to provide allotment facilities in areas of high demand and secure a sum of money to assist with the ongoing running and maintenance costs of such sites.

## **6.4 Problems faced by Allotment Associations**

The main problems experienced by AAs are:

### **6.4.1. Maintenance of boundaries**

Under the current lease agreements, AAs are responsible for repairing and securing site boundaries. Some of this work can be done by volunteers, although this is becoming increasingly difficult for health and safety and insurance reasons. However, purchase of materials and hire of equipment can be extremely expensive – for example, Torrisholme Road AA obtained quotes of around £10,000 for replacing the fencing around their site. Clearly such expenses cannot be covered by rental income alone. AAs have to engage in fundraising activities, including applying for external grants, which can be difficult and time consuming. A particular problem is that many funders refuse to give grants to AAs for maintaining boundaries because they believe that this should be the responsibility of the Council as landowner.

### **6.4.2 Antisocial behaviour**

An issue that is closely linked to maintenance of boundaries is antisocial behaviour such as vandalism (e.g. smashed greenhouses, broken fences), theft (e.g. of tools and produce), arson (e.g. burnt sheds) and harassment of plot holders (e.g. verbal abuse, stone throwing and even shooting with air rifles). The expense and danger has been known to deter people from taking plots on some sites.

#### 6.4.3 Unlet plots

Unlet plots are not necessarily a sign of low demand – they can be a symptom of other problems, such as the antisocial behaviour mentioned above. But whatever the cause, plots which have been vacant for some time become even more difficult to let as they become overgrown. AAs sometimes have to hire equipment and/or labour to clear the plots, or offer them at a reduced rent for the first year or so.

#### 6.4.4 Waste disposal

Although most waste generated by allotments is organic and can be composted and recycled on site, other types of waste (e.g. glass and metal) are difficult to dispose of. Some is generated by plot-holders, but some sites (e.g. Shrewsbury Drive) are also vulnerable to fly-tipping. AAs have to pay for this waste to be removed.

#### 6.4.5 Administration

Running an AA takes a considerable amount of volunteer time, commitment and skill. At the very least, an AA needs a secretary, chairperson and treasurer – and perhaps an additional fundraising co-ordinator. It is sometimes difficult to find people who are willing to do these jobs when committee members retire. Also there is a considerable cost for AA's to meet, as Table 2, below indicates.

Materials for repairs to water supply	£266.93
Stamps	£2.28
Photocopying	£4.00
Repairs to lawnmower	£70.50
Replacement locks and keys	£123.98
Insurance	£31.50
Membership of National Association	£143.50
Mowing/Strimming/Petrol	£211.75
Water Rates	£123.73

It is hoped that the recommendations in this report will help to ease the administrative burden on AAs through both the Council and ALMA taking a more proactive role in supporting allotments. This should give AAs more freedom to create and implement 'development plans' to improve their sites and engage in community outreach activities.



There is potential for ALMA to act as a contact point for all AAs to share information and advice so that each AA does not have to 'reinvent the wheel', and it is felt that a regular forum involving the Council, AAs and any other interested groups would be beneficial. In order to minimise costs this event should take place at either Lancaster or Morecambe Town Hall and on a night when the building is already being opened for another meeting or event.

#### **Recommendation 7**

That the Council in conjunction with ALMA organises a District-Wide Allotments Forum (including rural and privately owned allotments) twice per year to enable information and ideas to be shared, and issues of concern to be discussed and addressed.

### **6.5 Development of ALMA**

The group felt that the creation of ALMA represented a positive step in terms of development of allotments within the district. It was felt that the continued development of the organisation would assist the Council in responding to the needs of AAs and providing a central point of contact. Paul Cocker (Grounds Maintenance Operations Manager) confirmed this view saying that with a single point of contact it would be possible for him to work with Allotment Associations to provide goods and services with economies of scale and also to make available excess compost and other materials.

#### **Recommendation 8**

That ALMA be asked to assist the Council through providing AA contact details for the Council's website, and liaising with the Council on behalf of AA's.

The group passed on information to ALMA regarding various funding opportunities and grant schemes that could be of benefit to AA's. It is the belief of the group that AA's would be in a significantly better position if ALMA became a properly constituted organisation and registered as an environmental organisation for the purpose of receiving money for the development of allotments as environmental community facilities.

#### **Recommendation 9**

That ALMA be recommended to become a properly constituted organisation and investigate becoming an environmental organisation for the purposes of receiving and distributing funding from Land Fill Tax.

## 6.6 Finance

Table 3 shows allotment-related income and expenditure (Lancaster City Council Budget Book 2004-05, p.66).

**Table 3. Lancaster City Council's Allotments Budget**

2003/04 revised £	Cost centre area	Property Services - Allotments	2004/05 approved £	2005/06 forecast £
2,100	Premises costs	Use of Operational Buildings	2,200	2,300
3,400	Support services	Support Recharge from other General Fund Services	4,000	4,000
(7,400)	Income	Rents – general	(7,600)	(7,800)
(1,900)	Net	Total for allotments	(1,400)	(1,500)

In 2003/04, the Council's income from allotment leases was £7,400. Expenditure on allotments (premises costs and support services – both internal recharges) was listed as £5,500, leaving an apparent net surplus of £1,900.

The group agreed to recommend that this surplus should be ring fenced and given back to AAs by way of a subsidy.

The group received evidence from the Head of Property Services and asked for clarification on whether the apportioned recharges were in fact spent on allotments. The Head of Property Services confirmed that he felt, the Council's actual expenditure on allotments was much less than £5,500 per year.

He confirmed to the group that there are no Council-used 'operational buildings' on the allotment sites, and the Council does not pay for allotment-related repairs and maintenance – AAs are contractually responsible for this. The group were concerned that it appeared AA's were responsible for paying for maintenance and were effectively being charged for it at the same time.

It is believed that the apparent £2,100 premises costs are effectively a contribution from allotment income towards the Council's general (i.e. non-housing) repairs and

maintenance budget. Property Services are aware that there is a problem with this recharge area, and are introducing a new system to more accurately monitor property repairs and recharge them to the appropriate accounts. However, if this is the case then there would be a greater surplus and the group would like to see this also reapportioned.

The Support Services recharge covers the Council's administration of allotment sites. This administration involves:

- Collecting lease fees from the 12 AAs
- Reviewing contracts every 10 years.
- Adjusting lease fees every 3 years in line with the RPI.
- Dealing with a small number of allotment-related enquiries (e.g. passing on contact details for AAs, dealing with boundary disputes, etc)

The artificial system of internal recharges makes it very difficult to pin down the actual administrative cost to the Council. It is acknowledged that several different services are potentially involved (e.g. Property, Financial, Legal, Administration), but after careful consideration the group remains unconvinced that the projected cost of £4,000 pa in 2004/05 (approximately one-sixth of an employee, or slightly less than one day per week) can be justified or represents 'Best Value'.

It is felt that the true cost to the Council is likely to be no more than half of the projected cost.

To summarise, the Council is currently collecting around £7,600 from Allotment Associations whilst spending less than £2,000 on allotments, generating an annual surplus of £5,600 for the general revenue budget. At the same time AAs have to fundraise to meet the costs of maintaining their sites. The group believes that this is contrary to the best interests of the community.

The group considered several possible ways of ringfencing the allotments surplus for ploughing back into allotment sites. It could be done by setting up an 'Allotments Fund' for AAs to bid into. However, grant-administration is time consuming both for the Council and for AAs as applicants – both parties would prefer a simple system. Alternatively, the surplus could be recharged internally to pay for Council services to allotment sites, such as grounds maintenance and rubbish removal. But again, this would be relatively difficult to administer, and does not necessarily represent Best Value since AAs can often procure services at a lower cost than from the Council.

On reflection, the group felt that it would be simpler, fairer and better value for lease fees to be reduced significantly – so that they cover the Council's essential expenses but do not make a surplus. It is felt that the best way of doing this is to estimate the true cost to the Council and apportion this between the AAs according to acreage as a Basic Standard Running Cost Subsidy. For example, if the true cost is £2,000, the fee would be around £53 per acre (compared to around £270 per acre now, before concessions). It is suggested that payments should be payable annually, and lease fee discounts for unlet plots and concessions should

be discontinued. However, AAs should be encouraged to continue charging lower rents to concessionary plot holders.

The Council's allotment-related administration could be kept to a minimum by having contact details for all AAs on the Council's website (currently only two site secretaries are listed), and by dealing with simple enquiries through the proposed Customer Services Centre. In addition, a substantial reduction in lease fees would better enable AAs to meet their costs. It should be noted that the Council has a policy that all lettings should be at market value and that any subsidies are subsequently made through grant aid. This proposal would represent a departure from the current agreed policy and careful consideration would need to be made of the effect of this change, although as stated previously the group believe that allotments should be viewed as community facilities as opposed to purely property lettings.

#### **Recommendation 10**

That the Council reduces lease fees from the financial year 2005/06 onwards to a breakeven level, reapportioning the surplus by acreage, to AAs to enable them to spend more of their income from plot rental on site maintenance and running costs.

#### **Recommendation 11**

That the Council's Environmental Co-ordinator be asked to help ALMA to take advantage of internal and external funding opportunities – e.g. by passing on information about available grants.

## **7 Conclusion**

This report aims to provide the Cabinet and Council with a brief overview of the current situation regarding allotment provision within the district. The recommendations within it aim to enhance and improve what the group believes are vital community facilities, It is also the group's belief that allotments, (an often forgotten element of Council service provision) can provide positive contributions to key Council objectives as set out in the Corporate Plan, Community Strategy and Sustainability (LA 21) Strategy 'Agenda for Action'. The group would urge the Cabinet to consider the potential contribution and weigh this against the relatively modest financial and staffing issues, which these recommendations entail. The group would also ask Cabinet to consider the current perceived unfairness in the way that revenue from these leases is used for other Council services, whilst these community facilities are apparently neglected with little or no consideration from successive administrations.

Extract from Cabinet Minutes 18<sup>th</sup> January 2005**125 ALLOTMENTS - CABINET MEMBER WITH SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY  
COUNCILLOR ALEX STONE**

Councillor Roger Mace, was in attendance at the meeting, in accordance with Cabinet Procedure Rule 2.6 to present the report on behalf of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Cabinet considered a report upon the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in relation to Allotments. It proposed a number of recommendations based on the Committee's investigation that it would like Cabinet to adopt and include in its budget and policy framework proposals for 2005/06.

The options and options analysis (including risk assessment) were set out within the report as follows:

**Options and Options Analysis (including risk assessment)**

To agree the recommendations	The Overview and Scrutiny Committee believe that this option would be most beneficial to the Council.
Not to agree the recommendations	This option would achieve the status quo with no service improvements.
To agree parts of the recommendations	Whilst Cabinet could agree parts of the recommendations, it is the view of the Committee that this would stop short of providing the service improvements that the Overview and scrutiny committee feel are necessary.

It was moved by Councillor Gina Dowding and seconded by Councillor Eileen Blamire: -

"That the recommendations, as set out in the report, be approved, subject to recommendation (10) being deleted and replaced with: -

- That surpluses on the Allotments Account be set aside in a revenue reserve for improvements on the allotments."

and an addition to recommendation 1.2 of the report after "2005/06", as follows: -

- "and that the Chief Executive be requested to report upon the manpower and financial implications and how these will be prioritised in the 2005/06 Business Plans."

Members then voted as follows.

***Resolved unanimously:***

- (1) That Cabinet adopts the recommendations, as set out in the report, subject to recommendation (10) being deleted and replaced with: -

- That surpluses on the allotments account be set aside in a revenue reserve for improvements on the allotments.
- (2) That Cabinet recognise that the proposals, as set out in the report, have manpower and financial implications and that these are brought forward in terms of the budget and policy framework proposals for 2005/06 and that the Chief Executive be requested to report upon the manpower and financial implications and how these will be prioritised in the 2005/06 Business Plans.
- (3) That Cabinet provides a written response to the report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee within a reasonable timescale.

***Officers responsible for effecting the decision:***

Chief Executive.  
Corporate Director (Central Services)  
Corporate Director (Regeneration).  
Head of Financial Services.

***Reason for making the decision:***

The decision is the most beneficial to the City Council. It notes that the process that led to the report was initiated by the Association of Lancaster and Morecambe Allotments (ALMA) and the North West Counties Association of Allotments and Leisure Gardeners (NWCAA).

The decision also takes account of the report findings, which demonstrated the benefits of allotments to healthy living in the Lancaster District, and made a case for increased support from the City Council and its partners.

It also takes account of concerns to the proposal within recommendation 10, whereby a proposal was made by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to reduce rental levels to provide support to the Allotment Associations. This is contrary to City Council policy and would create a precedent for those cases where other charitable/community organisations occupy Council premises. Currently full market rent is applied to all rental levels. The effect of applying full rental levels can then be mitigated by the application of grant awards from the revenue reserve should the Council wish to support the group or activity concerned. This approach ensures transparency for all those organisations paying rent and is established good practice.

**Extract from Cabinet Minutes 22<sup>nd</sup> February, 2005**

**146 ALLOTMENTS - CABINET MEMBER WITH SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY  
COUNCILLOR ALEX STONE**

A report was considered that responded to Cabinet's request for information on the resource implications of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's report on Allotments.

The options and options analysis (including risk assessment), preferred option and comments were set out within the report as follows: -

Options were set out in the main body of the report.

**Option 1:**

The Environmental Co-ordinator becomes the officer lead contact for allotments but it is recognised that her current workload is such that in order to comprehensively address the issues identified by Overview and Scrutiny will require some of her other activities to cease. Activities have been identified which may enable much of this work to happen (recognising it is difficult to determine the extent, nature and volumes of enquiries, requests for support etc.) and relate to offering much less administrative support to the Sustainability Partnership and its associated Forums.

**Option 2:**

The Environmental Co-ordinator becomes the officer lead contact for allotments but it is recognised that her current workload is such that the issues identified by Overview and Scrutiny cannot be fully addressed without additional resources and, therefore, only those activities which could be absorbed without adding significant additional work, e.g. website development, general signposting, creating links with the Sustainability Forums, would be taken forward. For this to happen the Environmental Co-ordinator would still have to offer less administrative support to the Sustainability Partnership and its Forums.

**Option 3:**

That a part time (1 day a week) Allotments Officer post be created (located within either Corporate Strategy or Leisure Services) to carry out this work.

**Option 4:**

That a part time (1 day a week) Clerical Assistant post supporting the Environmental Co-ordinator be created to enable the Environmental Co-ordinator to devote the corresponding time to carry out this work.

The preferred option and comments were set out in the report as follows: -

The preferred option was Option 2. Apart from the revenue reserve for allotment development no other budget had been identified and allotments did not appear in the Cabinet's recently revised priorities.

Option 1 attempts to meet the full set of recommendations put forward by Overview and Scrutiny but it was doubtful that sufficient time could be set aside from a single

Officer's workload to fully meet this commitment.

Option 2 offered a realistic proposal as to what was achievable bearing in mind the full extent of the work required cannot be defined at this stage.

Whichever option was pursued ALMA should be encouraged to become actively involved in the Recycling, Food and Wildlife Sustainability Forums in order to maximise the potential opportunities that may be presented by such membership.

It was moved by Councillor Ian Barker and seconded by Councillor Jon Barry: -

"That Option 2, as set out in the report, be approved, subject to the addition of the following wording: -

- Up to half a day per week and any scope over and above the half day be used for the purposes of promotion of allotments."

Members then voted as follows.

***Resolved unanimously:***

- (1) That the City Council's Environmental Co-ordinator becomes the Officer lead contact for allotments, for up to half a day per week and any scope over and above the half day be used for the purposes of promotion of allotments, but that it is recognised that her current workload is such that the issues identified by the City Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee cannot be fully addressed without additional resources and ,therefore, only those activities which can be absorbed without adding significant additional work, e.g. website development, general signposting, creating links with the Sustainability Forums, will be taken forward. For this to happen the Environmental Co-ordinator will still have to offer less administrative support to the Sustainability Partnership and its Forums.

***Officers responsible for effecting the decision:***

Corporate Director (Community Services).  
Head of Financial Services.

***Reason for making the decision:***

The decision offers a realistic proposal as to what is achievable bearing in mind the full extent of the work required cannot be defined at this stage. It is recognised that her current workload is such that the issues identified by the City Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee cannot be fully addressed without additional resources and, therefore, only those activities, which can be absorbed without adding significant additional work, e.g. website development, general signposting, creating links with the Sustainability Forums, will be taken forward. For this to happen the City Council's Environmental Co-ordinator will still have to offer less administrative support to the Sustainability Partnership and its Forums.