

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL**Overview and Scrutiny****Allotments (Water Charges) Task and Finish Group****Friday, 22 September 2006****PRESENT:-**

Councillor Marion Allen (Chair)
Councillor Trini Crake
Councillor Les Patterson

Mr Oliver Northampton Allotments Network – Co-optee
Mr Care Northampton Allotments Network – Co-optee

Tony Spiezick Street Scene and Environment Manager
Tracy Tiff Scrutiny Officer

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Michelle Hoare, Carl Grimmer (Corporate Manager) and Paul Chambers (Team Leader).

2 MINUTES

Subject to the following amendments, the minutes of the meeting held on 7 September 2006 were agreed:

How do you intend to tackle the issue of water charges?

By implementing them over a 3-year period.

MATTERS ARISING

It was agreed that the Portfolio Holder would be sent an extract of the Chair's report so that he could agree the accuracy of the reporting of his interview.

It was commented that although the Group realised maintenance was outside its scope, it was concerned with the poor state of the Eastern Avenue (North) allotment site.

3 FINALISE THE CHAIR'S REPORT

The Task and Finish Group then discussed the Chair's draft final report and relevant amendments (copy attached to the minutes).

The report would be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 4 October 2006 and then to Cabinet for consideration.

The meeting closed at 4.15pm

Foreword

The Overview and Scrutiny Task and Finish Group, comprising Councillors Marion Allen, Trini Crake, Michelle Hoare, Les Patterson and two co-opted members, Mr Tony Care and Mr Barry Oliver, was set up because a motion was put forward and carried at Full Council on 22 May 2006 that asked for a time limited Scrutiny investigation to be undertaken for the proposed water charges for allotment holders within the Borough.

The review was a short, focussed piece of work that linked to the Council's corporate priorities and examined a range of information. The Task and Finish Group looked at water usage on allotment sites within the Borough of Northampton, water costs were investigated as were other Local Authorities allotment rental and water charges. Site visits to various allotments within the Borough took place, interviews with the Portfolio Holder (Community Engagement and Democratic Services) and senior staff from Northampton Borough Council were held, baseline information was received and desktop research carried out using the Internet.

This review was carried out between July 2006 and September 2006.



Councillor Marion Allen

Chair of the Allotments (Water Charges) Task and Finish Group

Acknowledgements to all those who took part in the Review:-

- Councillors Trini Crake, Michelle Hoare and Les Patterson who sat with me on this Task and Finish Group
- Councillor Les Patterson for producing the checklist template for the site visits
- Tony Care and Barry Oliver, representing the Northampton Allotments Network, co-opted members, for sharing their invaluable knowledge and expertise
- Councillor Phil Larratt (Portfolio Holder) for attending a meeting and providing essential information to inform the review
- Carl Grimmer (Corporate Manager), Tony Spiezick (Street Scene and Environment Manager) and Paul Chambers (Team Leader) for their hard work and dedication to this piece of work
- Tracy Tiff (Scrutiny Officer) for providing invaluable advice and helping compile the final report
- Margaret Martin (Consortium) for providing advice and support

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following a motion to Full Council, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee set up this Task and Finish Group to investigate the reasons for the proposed water charges for allotment holders within the Borough.

A significant amount of evidence was heard, details of which are contained in the report. After gathering evidence the Task and Finish Group established that the introduction of water charges to allotment holders could not be investigated in isolation. Other issues such as water leakage, water conservation, security on the allotment sites and possible concessionary discounts needed to be considered too.

- A number of Local Authorities charge allotment holders for water usage. However, where other Local Authorities' allotment rental charges are near or above that of Northampton's, concessions are given. Concessions range from a reduction in rental charges of 25% to 50%. Where water usage is charged by other Local Authorities, allotment rental is significantly lower than that of Northampton Borough Council. The possibility of introducing allotment rental reductions for the following categories was considered to be important: -
 - Individuals over 60 years of age
 - Disabled users
 - Unemployed users
- Anglian Water is unable to waive standing charges for the winter period as these cover the costs of providing and maintaining the services, which it has to do even though the usage may be seasonal. Water is often not used during the winter months on the allotment sites but a standing charge still applies for that period.
- There is a need to stop leakages on all sites. The installation of standpipes on allotment sites would be a simple solution that works in other areas.
- It was felt that it would probably be more cost effective to install standpipes on allotment sites at the same time that the water pipes are replaced as these would appear more cost effective to maintain than the current system.
- The water tanks that are currently on sites could be recycled and used similarly to a water butt, they would just need to be disconnected from the water mains.
- There is a need to ensure good security measures on each allotment site in order to alleviate vandalism, for example damage to water systems and encourage people to use allotments.
- Water leakage puts up water usage and cost. It is a priority that repairs should be made to the water pipes at Eastern Avenue (North) allotment site to prevent the current water leakage problem. In the short term, the Council could borrow finance to repair water leakages. For every £1 of revenue spent, £20 could be borrowed. In accordance with the Allotments

Act 1908, any money from the sale of allotment land can be used to re-pay a loan. If the Eastern Avenue (North) allotment site was to be downsized there could be a reduction of approximately 80-100 plots. Any sale of land from this site could be utilised to cover some costs of replacing the water pipes. At current, land prices per acre would raise approximately £1,000,000.

- It would be beneficial for consideration to be given to the water supply for allotment sites that do not use water to be turned off.
- The Council does not have a water conservation plan and there do not appear to be imminent plans to introduce one.
- The Allotment Strategy that was produced in 2004 was not adopted.
- It appears that with better-run allotments there is autonomous allotment management which could be achieved through allotments being run by Allotment Societies or Charitable Trusts. There are other advantages of allotments being run Trusts such as the ability to apply for external funding and special grants, security of tenure which enables better future planning, a more focussed approach and removal from the political arena.

The above overall findings have formed the basis for the following recommendations. The recommendations are aimed at providing a sustainable future for allotments in the Borough. The Task and Finish Group asked the Cabinet to consider implementing the following recommendations by April 2008:

- That there should be no introduction of water charges until all water pipes on each allotment site have been replaced.
- That a Water Charging Policy be introduced containing the following conditions:-
 - (a) Water usage to be charged at a rate per pole per field as an incentive to conserve water.
 - (b) When permission to erect a shed on an allotment plot is granted, the placing of a water butt with guttering, for water conservation should be a condition of approval.
- That when the water pipes are replaced, the installation of standpipes of allotment sites is explored.
- That consideration be given to taking out a short-term loan against future land sale to cover the cost of replacing water pipes on all allotment sites.

The following recommendations are outside the Group's original remit but are being put forward for consideration as they are connected to the issue under review. They arose during the work of the review and are significant to the future

management of the allotment sites and are offered as support to the work of the Council: -

- That consideration be given to revisiting and updating the Allotment Strategy 2004. The Allotment Strategy should be adopted by April 2007. Once approved and implemented, it could be used as a benchmark for the future, such as an umbrella for a five-year business plan for each allotment site. Within the Allotment Strategy the following issues need to be addressed: -
 - Security
 - Water conservation plan
 - Disabled access
 - Alternative methods to manage/run allotment sites

- That consideration be given to the introduction of 50% concessions for allotment rental charges and the following groups be considered: -
 - Individuals over 60 years of age
 - Disabled users
 - Unemployed users

Northampton Borough Council

Overview and Scrutiny

Report of the Allotments (Water Charges) Task and Finish Group

1. Purpose

The purpose of the Task and Finish Group was to investigate the reasons for the proposed water charges for allotment holders within the Borough. The review was linked to the Council's corporate priorities. A copy of the Scope of the Review is attached at Appendix A.

2. Context and Background

2.1 A motion was put forward and carried at Full Council on 22 May 2006 that asked for a short, focused, time limited Scrutiny investigation to be undertaken for the proposed water charges for allotment holders within the Borough. The motion read as follows: -

"We call on the Council to discontinue the 5% above inflation annual uplift in allotment rents.

We call on the Council to introduce a fair system of charges for water usage on allotments in place of the proposed flawed system.

That a time limited scrutiny investigation is undertaken for the proposed water charges."

2.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee, at its meeting on 14 June 2006, agreed to include this short, focussed piece of Scrutiny work in its Work Programme for 2006/2007.

2.3 A Councillor Task and Finish Group was established. The Group sought Co-Optees from the allotment holders in the Borough to participate in the review. Two allotment holders representing the Northampton Allotments Network, Mr Tony Care and Mr Barry Oliver, joined the Group. The Group commenced its work in July 2006 and concluded its findings during September 2006.

2.4 The Task and Finish Group agreed that the following areas needed to be investigated and linked to the realisation of the council's corporate priorities:

- How the Council arrived at the current charging structure
- How the Cabinet came to the decision to implement water charges to allotment holders
- Whether allotment charges previously included water
- Fairness in cost in relation to the size of the allotment

- Water leakage issues
- Conservation of water
- Whether water charges were previously included in the Council's allotment renting arrangements
- Comparisons of a sample of the water charging structures that exist within other Local Authorities

3. Evidence Collection

In scoping this review it was decided that evidence would be collected from a variety of sources:

3.1 Site Visits to various Allotment Sites

Members of the Task and Finish Group undertook visits to allotments sites within the Borough. The aim was to visit a mix of different sizes and sorts of sites, both privately and Borough owned to gain a comprehensive picture. The visits included the following:

- Kettering Road Allotment Site (Privately owned)
- Mereway Allotment Site
- Eastern Avenue (North) Allotment Site
- Blisworth Allotment Site (Privately owned)

A Checklist for the site visit was produced by Councillor Patterson (copies attached at Appendix B).

The key points that emerged from the visits were:

3.1.1 Kettering Road

This is a large site of 280 10-pole plots. The water is all naturally sourced from four wells and a stream. The average distance from the water source is variable but many plots have water butts attached to sheds to ensure the natural collection of water. Most water butts are of average size (500 litres), some being open topped. Water conservation is estimated at 25%. The security on the site was felt to be good and secure gates were in situ. After initial purchase, individual allotment holders own the land for their plot. There is a service charge of £10.00 for a ten-pole plot and no charges for water.

3.1.2 Mereway

Mereway is a temporary site with 60 10-pole plots although just 52 are in use, car parking and the community green area use some plots. Two plots are unusable due to water logging. The water source is via mains supply (large tanks). The allotment holders said that they felt that there is a need for an additional seven large tanks to ensure an adequate supply of water. The allotment holders suggested that if Northampton Borough Council provided the additional tanks, they would fit them on the site. The site operates a strict

hosepipe ban. Some plots have water butts but there are few sheds. The allotment holders try to conserve water but do not have enough facilities. The annual rental charge is £27.35 for a ten-pole plot.

Security on the site is poor. Fencing is poor and it was felt that there is a need for palisade fencing. The continuity of the Mereway allotment site is in question it is a temporary site and will eventually be secured for cemetery provision but it is seen to be well run given the circumstances.

Mereway Allotment Site is an example of a well run site and photographs are attached at Appendix C).

3.1.3 Eastern Avenue (North)

Eastern Avenue (North) is a very large site of 246 10-pole plots. The water source is supplied by mains through tanks. There is a lot of water leakage on the site. Generally, plots are a long distance from the water source. 'DIY' taps have been installed on some of the tanks which indicate possible hosepipe usage.

It was felt the site was generally in poor condition and very untidy, with lots of rubbish, including an abandoned car. There is no evidence of weed control and the weeds, including ragwort, appear very healthy and prolific which could also indicate water leakage. Water conservation is poor on the site. This is symptomatic of what appears to be a badly managed site.

Security on the site is poor due to the need for repair to the fencing. The wire fencing is inadequate and access could be gained via adjacent housing. There are a few sheds on the site and a few allotment holders have water butts.

There are approximately 100 empty plots and many plots are rented but not cultivated. Water is turned off for the winter period, October to March, each year. Last year the site used 400 cubic metres but this year just 34 cubic metres was used for the six-month period ending March 2006. The annual rental charge is £27.35 per 10-pole plot.

If the Eastern Avenue (North) allotment site was to be downsized there could be a reduction of approximately 80-100 plots. Any sale of land from this site could be utilised to cover some costs suggested later in the report. (Photographs of the site are attached at Appendix D).

3.1.4 Blisworth (privately run allotment site)

Blisworth Allotment Site is outside the Borough of Northampton but was visited to use as a comparator. The site is a 610-pole site (1.5 acres) with approximately 55 plots and 50 of which are in use. Most plots are 10 poles. There is flexibility in plot size and usage. The annual rental charge for a 10-pole plot is £11. Water is provided by mains through 12 standpipes. The site operates a water co-operative scheme. Each member pays £20 life

membership and the water bill is then split equally between all members of the co-operative. There is a water metre at the mains and charges are 25p per pole (£2.50 per 10 pole site). However, not all allotment holders are members of the water co-operative and therefore use their own water through methods such as water butts. The site practises 100% water conservation. There are no leaks and hoses are not permitted. The site is very tidy and well kept.

The water scheme is felt to be very fair and the charges for rental are also seen as fair and flexible, for example, annual rental on an 8-pole plot (without water) equates to £5.20.

A copy of the tenancy agreement and constitution for the Blisworth Allotment site is attached at Appendix E.

3.2 Corporate Manager (Street Scene)

The Corporate Manager provided baseline data as requested. Current allotment rental charges are £27.30 per ten-pole plot (pro rata).

It was explained that, the possibility of employing a flat rate water charge to all allotment holders of approximately £6.50 had been investigated. This had been based upon the cost to the Council of water usage over the year. The water charges were per plot irrespective of size and had been scheduled for introduction in October 2006. The introduction of water charges to allotment holders has been suspended until this Overview and Scrutiny review is completed.

3.3 Street Care and Environment Manager

The Street Care and Environment Manager provided information on the following areas: -

3.3.1 Council's Corporate Priorities

This review links to the Council's corporate priorities as it demonstrates further working with the community. (Corporate Priorities attached at Appendix F).

3.3.2 Allotment sites within the Borough

There are 13 Council run sites and two field sites spread throughout the town (Comprehensive details attached at Appendix G.)

Of the Council run sites seven have waiting lists. There is also a waiting list for one of the field sites and the leased site. There are available plots on eight of the sites. (Appendix G refers)

3.3.3 Actual Charge of Water to the Council

The total water charges for allotment sites, including all leaks and standing charges, to the Council per year is around £9,600 (Appendix H refers).

Water is not used during the winter months but a standing charge still applies for that period. Some allotment sites have a zero water usage and the Group felt that it would be beneficial for consideration to be given to the water supply for such allotment sites be turned off. The Graspin Lane allotment site during the period 13 May to 20 October 2005 used 2081 cubic metres of water equating to a bill of £1,810.95 (including £19.84 standing charge). This was the highest water bill for allotment sites in the Borough. There has been no water usage for Bridgewater Drive and Harlestone Road allotment sites.

3.3.4 Allotment benchmarking carried out in October 2005

Allotment benchmarking was carried out in October 2005. (Copy attached at Appendix I.)

The key points from the allotment benchmarking were: -

3.3.4.1 Flexible Charging (Concessions) Policies

■
Many Local Authorities offered concessionary rates ranging from between 25% to 50%. Where allotment rental charges were near to or above that of Northampton's, concessions were given.

The Group considered the possibility of introducing concessions to allotment rental charges for the following groups: -

- Individuals over 60 years of age
- Disabled people
- Unemployed people

Currently, allotment holders in Northampton are billed annually. Concessionary rates would be based on an individual's eligibility one month prior to the bill being issued. Individuals would be required to supply evidence that they qualified for a concession.

Bedford Borough Council offers concessions to allotment holders over 60 years of age, unemployed people and various concessionary groups as per the Council's leisure card concessionary groupings.

North Hertfordshire District Council offers a 50% reduction in allotment rental charges to individuals over 60, unemployed people, students over 18 and individuals on incapacity benefit.

High Wycombe District Council offers concessions of 50% for senior citizens, as do Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council and Chelmsford Borough Council.

Macclesfield Borough Council offers 50% concessions for pensioners and 30% for society run sites.

Luton Borough Council offers a 50% discount to holders on their first plot and Milton Keynes Borough Council gives 50% discount to concessionary groups (Pensioners, disabled people, unemployed people and single parents).

The majority of the Local Authorities contacted include water charges in their rental charges.

3.3.5 Water Leakages and costs

There would be a need to dig up the current pipe work on individual allotment sites to assess the water leakages. External consultants' fees to carry out this work would be £3,000.

An example was given of the cost to relay a 50mm bore pipe from the mains to cover the allotment site at Weston Favell. It was estimated to be in the region of £13,500. Due to a pre-determined capital programme a 32mm bore pipe is currently being fitted to the Weston Favell site, not 50mm bore as recommended.

3.3.7 3.3.6 Fencing Security Costs

The cost of replacing one metre of palisade fencing would be £52.00. This includes an allowance for ground clearance.

To install palisade fencing around the perimeter of all allotment sites in the Borough would cost approximately £276,496 (Attached at Appendix J is a plan of allotments within the Borough).

Two sites were investigated in respect of implementing new fencing for security purposes: -

A. Mereway Allotment Site

There is existing fencing on Mereway Allotment Site. The cost to introduce palisade fencing to the roadside hedged area alone would be in the region of £6,500, which would provide security for existing and future use.

B. Bants Lane Allotment Site

The Bants Lane Allotment Site is mainly laid to hedges. Palisade fencing would be required around the whole perimeter of the site which would cost between £47,000 and £50,000 depending on the groundworks required once the hedges have been removed.

3.4 Desktop Research

Desktop research was carried out with a number of Local Authorities to determine their allotment rental charges and any charges made to allotment holders for water usage. The following councils were contacted: -

- Bedford Borough Council
- Leicester City Council
- Coventry City Council
- Luton Borough Council
- Southampton City Council
- Milton Keynes Borough Council

The Key points were: -

3.4.1 Bedford Borough Council

Bedford Borough Council comes within Anglian Water Authority. The Council has five allotment sites, giving a total of 608 plots, 90% of which are in use. Each plot is roughly 10 poles, with all five sites covering around 13.57 hectares of land in total. The current rates are £35.70 (per plot) per year. £20.90 per year for holders on concessionary rates. There are no additional charges for the use of water. When a tenancy commences the Council offers to prepare the plot free of charge, whether it be flailing, chisel ploughing, rotovating or removing rubbish/structures. If a holder would like any works completed after the initial preparation, there would be an additional charge. There are also a number of sites in Bedford which are owned by Parish Councils.

3.4.2 Leicester City Council

Leicester City Council comes within Severn Trent Water Authority. There are 45 operational allotment sites across the city offering 3,200 cultivated plots. Annual rental costs are from £5 to £21 per 300 square yard plot (approximately 10 poles), with the higher rates including all water charges.

There are 33 city allotments managed by local allotment societies. 22 allotment societies in Leicester all provide full-time stewards who look after the day-to-day management of their allotment sites. Societies may also offer the opportunity to buy compost, fertiliser, seeds and other gardening supplies on site. The remaining sites are owned by the City Council and leased directly to allotment holders. Direct let sites do not offer on-site management but site visits and any necessary maintenance work or repairs are carried out by the Council.

3.4.3 Coventry City Council

Coventry City Council comes within Severn Trent Water Authority. Allotments are run by an Allotment Society rather than the Council and the Council leases the allotment sites to Coventry and District Allotment Society. The

Coventry and District Allotment Society then sub lets the plots to individual associations. Each association has a representative who agrees the charges on each plot. The current charges are £100 per acre per year, individual associations add fees to this such as subscriptions to the National Allotment Society, charges for watered metre usage and insurance (e.g. public liability). The average size of an allotment plot is 10 poles (250 square metres) and the charge is £15.18 per year. Each site has a water metre.

3.4.4 Luton Borough Council

Luton Borough Council comes within Three Valleys Water Authority. All allotment sites are Council owned. The current charges to allotment holders are £1.96 per pole for first class sites and £0.64 for second-class sites (without water/perimetre fencing) per year. Price increases are due to be implemented from 1 October 2006: - £2.20 per pole for first class sites and £0.70 per pole for a second-class site per year. No additional charges are made to allotment holders for water usage.

There are 1,103 plots within the borough covering 15 sites, 13 of which are active and approximately 900 plots are in use. The size of an allotment plot varies from between 3 and 12 poles. (90.75 square yards and 363 square yards).

3.4.5 Southampton City Council

Southampton City Council comes within Southern Water Authority. All allotment sites are Council owned. The current annual charge to allotment holders are sites with water £3.04 per pole. The annual charge for a ten-pole site is £30.40. One pole equates to 25.3 square metres. Two sites have sheds and toilets and the annual rental charge is £6.75 per pole. The annual charge for a ten-pole site is £67.50. All allotment holders pay a £5 plot deposit and £5 key deposit.

There are 28 allotment sites with over 700 plots. Each plot is usually between 5 and 10 poles. (126.5 square metres and 253 square metres).

3.4.6 Milton Keynes Borough Council

Milton Keynes Borough Council comes within Anglian Water Authority. Rental Charges for the Season from September 2005 - October 2006: -

- Category A Site with all facilities £2.98 per pole per annum (Including water)
- Category B Site with limited facilities £2.29 per pole per annum
- Category C Site with no facilities £1.84 per pole per annum It is proposed that rental charges will increase by 3% for the next season.

Senior Citizens, Registered Disabled, Persons Unemployed and Single Parent Families are entitled to a 50% reduction.

There are approximately 1,500 plots (from 4 to 12 poles) over 57 sites in the Borough.

Comprehensive details of the desktop research are attached at Appendix K.

NB: A 10-pole plot equates to approximately 250 square metres (300 square yards).

3. 5 Portfolio Holder Community Engagement and Democratic Services

The Portfolio Holder (Community Engagement and Democratic Services) attended the meeting on 7 September 2006 (Copy of the minutes of that meeting are attached at Appendix L).

The key points of evidence were: -

- Cabinet arrived at the proposed charging structure by dividing the Council's water bill for its allotments by the number of plots in the Borough. An average was calculated which would be the charge to each allotment holder.
- Following research with other Local Authorities regarding how they address water usage and charges on their allotments, it was decided to look at the introduction of water charges to the allotment holders. A number of Local Authorities charge allotment holders for water usage.
- The introduction of water charges to allotment holders is necessary due to there being increased water charges and usage.
- Cabinet is aware of the problem of water leakages. Investigations are taking place to raise the capital monies required to carry out all of the necessary repairs. Water leakages of a significant nature will have to be addressed. It would not be cost effective to repair all water leaks now as there are plans to replace all the 25mm pipes with 50 mm water supply. To repair the water piping at the Weston Favell allotment site would cost £13,500. Water leaks cost £1,800 per year. Water leakage is around 40% for which major capital investment is required to rectify.
- Allotments are a non-profitable operation to the Council. If an allotment site were sold, any surplus monies would be ringfenced for allotment investment and enhancement. In accordance with the Allotment Act 1908 proceeds from the sale of any allotments should be used to improve the facilities on the remaining sites left in the Borough.

- Cabinet is committed to providing successful and flourishing allotment sites that are fully occupied. It is looking to address the current over provision by sale of surplus sites in order to re-invest significantly in the remaining sites thereby enhancing the quality of the sites and facilities.

The future of allotment sites within the Borough is secure. The issue of over provision of allotments needs to be addressed. Existing temporary sites need to be relocated and their future secured. Investigations are taking place to ensure adequate provision as the population of the Borough increases and in areas of the town where there is lack of provision. There is a problem with security on some of the allotment sites and there is a need to ensure this is addressed.

- Section 23 of the Allotment Act 1908 states *‘that, among others, Borough Councils have a duty to provide sufficient allotments according to demand, for letting to persons resident within their areas.’* The rate of provision is 0.2 hectares per 1000 population. 0.2 hectares per 1000 equals 0.49 acres per 1000 population. The Council’s present position is 158.56 acres. Therefore there is an over provision of 60.56 acres, plus Harlestone Road Site 2. The Council is looking to secure provision through the local development framework. The population figures for Northampton were based on the 2001 census.
- The Mereway allotment site is a temporary site and will eventually be secured for cemetery provision. At the current usage, there will be a need to expand Towcester Road cemetery in approximately seven years time. Currently, there are 700 burials per year. The land at Mereway allotment site would provide approximately 22 years of burials.
- Allotments becoming a Charitable Trust should be investigated. Finance would be available to manage the allotment sites should the decision be taken for allotments to be run by a Charitable Trust.
- An Allotment Strategy was produced in 2004 but was not adopted. Following the adoption of an Allotment Strategy it would be a natural progression to introduce a business plan for each allotment site.

3.6 Position Statement from Anglian Water

Correspondence was sent to Anglian Water asking for a position statement regarding grey water on allotment sites and whether it might be possible for standing water charges for allotments to be amended as the allotment holders often only use water six months a year.

Anglian Water confirmed that an allowance against sewerage charges for grey water usage (for example bath water) would not be applicable to an allotment site as there is no domestic usage before the water is used on the allotments. To confirm the volume of water returned or not returned to the main sewer, a private sub metre should be installed. The installation,

maintenance and reading of this metre would be the responsibility of Northampton Borough Council. Water supply pipes after Anglian Water's metre is the responsibility of the landowner who should arrange for the leak to be traced and repaired. Northampton Borough Council does not pay sewerage charges to Anglian Water.

Anglian Water is unable to waive standing charges for the winter period as these cover the costs of providing and maintaining the services, which it has to do even though the usage may be seasonal.

To allow Anglian Water to check the tariff and charges billed for each allotment site, the Council has provided Anglian Water with the individual water account numbers for each site.

A copy of the letter from Anglian Water is attached at Appendix M.

4. Conclusions

After all of the evidence was collated the following conclusions were drawn: -

- 4.1 The introduction of water charges to allotment holders could not be investigated in isolation. Other issues such as water leakage, water conservation, security on the allotment sites and possible concessionary discounts needed to be considered too.
- 4.2 A number of Local Authorities charge allotment holders for water usage. However, where other Local Authorities' allotment rental charges are near or above that of Northampton's, concessions are given. Concessions range from a reduction in rental charges of 25% to 50%. Where water usage is charged by other Local Authorities, allotment rental is significantly lower than that of Northampton Borough Council. For example, Milton Keynes Borough Council offers a 50% concession to senior citizens, registered disabled, persons Unemployed and single parent families. Concessionary Groups would therefore pay a rental charge of £14.90 per year for a plot with all facilities.

The possibility of introducing allotment rental reductions for the following categories was considered to be important: -

- Individuals over 60 years of age
- Disabled users
- Unemployed users

Allotment holders are billed annually and the concessionary rates could be based on the individual's circumstances one month prior to the bill being issued.

- 4.3 Anglian Water is unable to waive standing charges for the winter period as these cover the costs of providing and maintaining the services,

which it has to do even though the usage may be seasonal. Water is often not used during the winter months on the allotment sites but a standing charge still applies for that period. Some allotment sites have a zero water usage. It would be beneficial for consideration to be given to the water supply for such allotment sites to be turned off.

- 4.4 There is a need to stop leakages on all sites. The installation of standpipes on allotment sites would be a simple solution that works in other areas. There is a need to ensure good security on each site which should alleviate vandalism and encourage people to use allotments. It would probably be more cost effective to install standpipes on allotment sites at the same time that the water pipes are replaced as these would appear more cost effective to maintain than the current system.
- 4.5 The water tanks that are currently on sites could be recycled and used similarly to a water butt, they would just need to be disconnected from the water mains.
- 4.6 Currently, good security is not consistent across all sites. There is a need to ensure good security measures on each allotment site in order to alleviate vandalism, for example, damage to water systems and to encourage people to use allotments.
- 4.7 Water leakage puts up water usage and cost. To determine the extent of water leakages on the allotment sites, there would be a need to dig up the current pipework on individual allotment sites to assess leakages for each site. In the short term, the Council could borrow finance to repair water leakages. For every £1 of revenue spent, £20 could be borrowed. In accordance with the Allotments Act 1908, any money from the sale of allotment land can be used to re-pay a loan. If the Eastern Avenue (North) allotment site was to be downsized there could be a reduction of approximately 80-100 plots. Any sale of land from this site could be utilised to cover some costs of replacing the water pipes. At current, land prices per acre would raise approximately £1,000,000.
- 4.8 It is a priority that repairs should be made to the water pipes at Eastern Avenue (North) allotment site to prevent the current water leakage problem.
- 4.9 The Group felt that it would be beneficial for consideration to be given to the water supply for allotment sites that do not use water to be turned off.
- 4.10 Currently, the Council does not have a water conservation plan and there do not appear to be imminent plans to introduce one.
- 4.11 The Allotment Strategy that was produced in 2004 was not adopted.

4.12 It appears that with better-run allotments there is autonomous allotment management which could be achieved through allotments being run by Allotment Societies or Charitable Trusts. There are other advantages of allotments being run as Trusts such as the ability to apply for external funding and special grants, security of tenure which enables better future planning, a more focussed approach and removal from the political arena. Local Authorities, such as Coventry City Council, lease their allotment land to Allotment Associations or Charitable Trusts. The Allotment Associations or Trusts then manage the sites. Northampton Borough Council would still have a statutory responsibility for allotments. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that should it be decided for the Council's allotments to be managed by Charitable Trusts, finance would be available to improve and maintain the sites.

4.13 It was established that there is a need for more allotment provision in the south of the town.

5 Recommendations

The Task and Finish Group asks the Cabinet to implement the following recommendations as soon as possible but by no later than April 2008: -

5.1 That there should be no introduction of water charges until all water pipes on all allotment site have been replaced.

5.2 That a Water Charging Policy be introduced containing the following conditions:-

(a) Water usage to be charged at a rate per pole and per field as an incentive to each field to conserve water.

(b) When permission to erect a shed on an allotment plot is granted, the placing of a water butt with guttering for water conservation should be a condition of approval.

5.3 That when the water pipes are replaced, the installation of standpipes of allotment sites is explored.

5.4 That consideration be given to taking out a short term loan against future land sale to cover the cost of replacing water pipes on all allotment sites.

The following recommendations are outside the Group's original remit but are being put forward for consideration to Cabinet as they are connected to the issue under review. They arose during the work of the review and are significant to the future management of the allotment sites and are offered as support to the work of the Council:-

5.5 That consideration be given to revisiting and updating the Allotment Strategy 2004. The Allotment Strategy should be adopted by April 2007. Once approved and implemented, it could be used as a benchmark for the future, such as an umbrella for a five-year business plan for each allotment site. Within the Allotment Strategy the following issues need to be addressed:-

- Security
- Water conservation plan
- Disabled access
- Alternative methods to manage/run allotment sites

5.6 That consideration be given to the introduction of 50% concessions for allotment rental charges and the following groups be considered:-

- Individuals over 60 years of age
- Disabled users
- Unemployed users