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**Addressing the Allotment ‘Subsidy’**

**1. Introduction**

Since 2010 Brighton & Hove City Council’s funding from Government has been cut by £77 million. Further cuts of £68 million are expected over the next 4 years. As a result, the council’s sports and allotments services have been asked to reduce costs by £250,000 over the next 4 years.

Last year the allotment service had an overall operating deficit of just £37,369.

Rob Walker (Head of Operations, BHCC City Parks) has asked the BHAF and our members to identify ways to reduce this deficit. The council has suggested raising rental fees (potentially by as much as 32%) as one of the ways of reducing the operating deficit.

Following meetings with and directions from our members, this note forms the BHAF response.

**2. Principles behind the BHAF response.**

BHAF recognises impacts of increasing financial pressures on Brighton & Hove City Council. However BHAF is also concerned that Brighton & Hove allotments are already amongst the most expensive in the country.[[1]](#footnote-1)   
  
Allotments must remain affordable for those sections of the community they were originally intended for. It would be a travesty for them to be ‘priced out’ and for allotments to become a playground for those who are better off.

Allotments bring a host of community, social, mental and physical health benefits, as well as environmental and sustainability benefits, and BHAF has a responsibility for ensuring that those benefits remain accessible for all members of the community, and the city at large, in the short term and into the future. We believe the broad benefits far outweigh the relatively small operating cost to the Council.

The principle of relying on rental fee changes to guarantee a cost neutral allotment service is inherently problematic when so many variables (such as the number of plots let, proportion of concessions, number and nature of annual ad hoc repairs etc) will vary from year to year. Given that historically, overall demand for allotments has varied (the excess demand experienced over the last decade or so contrasts with a period of relatively low interest in the 90's, for example) - any arrangement reliant on rental fee changes to achieve cost neutrality would be one that necessitated those fees to be adjusted up or down - potentially by a significant percentage - on an annual basis.

We also feel it is important to put the council’s request into context. Continued ‘salami slicing’ of small budgets such as ours does not significantly ease the council’s current financial situation, or provide a sustainable solution to the council’s long term funding challenges.

Finally, our members have complained that presentation of direct costs allocated against allotments is unclear, making it difficult to be confident that the service currently achieves best value for money. This is clearly an issue if they are being asked to pay substantially more to cover those costs.

For all these reasons, BHAF cannot support a rent rise above inflation. Rather, we feel that efforts to reduce the current operating deficit should focus on decreasing unnecessary expenditure, improving efficiency and seeking additional income streams.

**3. Areas of Common Agreement**

Discussions between the council’s allotment team, BHAF and our members have already established 3 areas of common agreement. These are:

1: That a £15 administration charge should be introduced for those joining the allotment waiting list (waived for concessions) as agreed in the Allotment Strategy[[2]](#footnote-2).

2: That age based concessions should be brought in line with state pension age.

3: That those dependent on concessions should be protected from future rental increases above the rate of inflation.

Assuming that councillors agree these proposals, the working operating deficit is expected to reduce to £30,239 (the council allotment team estimates introduction of points 1 and 2 will generate £4969 and £2162 p/a respectively).

**4. Ways to further reduce the operating deficit.**

The allotment team has suggested that a rental increase of 32% for non-concessions could clear the remainder of the current operating deficit from 2017/18. However, this assumes that the operating deficit will remain at its current levels.

BHAF argues that the baseline operating deficit can be further reduced by implementing additional efficiencies, decreasing unnecessary expenditure and proactively seeking new revenue streams, and that short term efforts should focus on these areas before rent increases are considered. BHAF feels that additional efficiencies can be achieved through:

**4.1: Redressing Water Wastage**

This year, allotment water costs exceeded £30,000. It is widely acknowledged that an unknown proportion of this cost results from leaks. Smart meters were recently installed at allotment sites. In the short term, BHAF requests that the council use the meters to identify the extent of water leaks at allotment sites and their associated costs. Leaks should then be fixed, and operating costs reduced accordingly. At the same time BHAF will work with plot-holders to improve water management in order to further reduce unnecessary water wastage

**4.2: Improving the Efficiency of Service Administration**

The current paper based administration system used by the allotment service is acknowledged as being inefficient. BHAF recognise that the council is currently migrating to an improved IT based system, but request that this is carried out in fuller partnership with and consideration of all users / potential beneficiaries (critically including the volunteer site representatives on whom the current allotment service depends). A system that works well for site representatives as well as the council’s allotment service can, amongst other things, ensure vacant allotment plots are let as quickly as possible – increasing service income. Conversely, failure to effectively accommodate the needs of site reps increases the risk that fewer people will volunteer for these roles in future, increasing administrative burden on the council.

**4.3: Dissuading people from claiming concessions they don’t need.**

The current system enables Senior Citizens, Full Time Students and those on Income Support to claim concessionary rents. BHAF suggests that more effort should be made to ensure concessions are only claimed by people who really need them, rather than claimed / applied automatically. At a recent meeting some members in receipt of Senior Citizens concessions, for example, identified that whilst some in their bracket did have real need of that concession, others (including themselves) didn’t.

The current allotment application form reads; “Are you eligible for a reduced rent? If so please tick the appropriate box”.

BHAF suggest this is amended to “Eligibility for a concession does not necessarily mean that the concession is required. In order to help us keep allotments affordable for those in greatest need, please only claim a concession if you really need it” (or similar).

**4.4: Identifying new funding streams**

Given the range of benefits Allotments bring, BHAF feels that there are numerous potential mechanisms for generating funding that could be unlocked *if the council is proactive and innovative in pursuing them*. These include:

* Thinking creatively about ways to increase the number of let plots (for example, whilst many sites have long waiting lists, a few have vacant plots which could be offered to those waiting elsewhere),
* Investigating mutually beneficial arrangements with potential partners (cultural, health, educational, environmental etc,) and
* Exploring grant-funding opportunities.

Unfortunately, in BHAF’s experience the council has historically been unlikely to lead creative approaches to maximise the value allotments could generate, preferring to maintain the status quo. BHAF feel that this approach, which also restricts the extent to which non-financial benefits of allotments can be shared amongst the wider community, is wrong irrespective of the council’s budgetary health.

BHAF ask the council for genuine commitment to investigate such opportunities in future, and if that assurance is given, commit our help in return.

**5. Phasing of rental increases**

Our strong preference is for the council to implement the measures outlined above and assess their impact before considering whether additional savings need to be achieved through increased allotment rents.

If, however, the council continues to pursue rental increases in the short term, BHAF argues that these must be achieved in a way that doesn’t price vulnerable residents out of continued access to the benefits that allotments bring, and also argues that any rent rises must be phased over two years so that the impact of the efficiencies outlined in section 4 can be properly incorporated into the final budget plan.

**6. Additional Concession Category**

BHAF are especially concerned about the impact any rent rise may have on low-income plot holders who do not currently qualify for a concession. BHAF, along with the Food Partnership, shares the council’s concern that ‘in work poverty’ is a huge issue in the city and argues for the introduction of a new ‘low income household’ concession category for allotment users from October 2017.

BHAF expects that, through initiatives such as the Fairness Commission and Food Poverty Action Plan, BHCC will already have considered suitable thresholds for ‘Low Income’ relative to the Brighton & Hove context. If not, BHAF suggests that eligibility for the new low-income concession could be based on ability to demonstrate receipt of Working Tax Credit or Housing Benefit. The administration process for the allotment officer would be the same as it is currently.

Currently Concessions are available for Senior Citizens, Income Support and Full Time Students. We wish to add a concession for those in receipt of ‘Working Tax Credit or Housing Benefit’

**7: Improving partnership moving forwards.**

BHAF reminds the council that the current allotment service is only able to operate within existing budgets because of the efforts of an army of volunteers, most notably site representatives. For some time we have had serious concerns about the professionalism with which the council sometimes treats these volunteers. We ask the council to commit to working with us to improve this partnership over coming months. Doing so will increase the likelihood of the council being able to continue to rely on this goodwill funded resource into the future.

1. A recent survey in Allotment & Leisure Gardener showed 59% of responders paid less than £50 pa for an allotment, 16% paid between £50 and £80 pa and 12% paid between £80 - £100 pa. The current rental of a plot in Brighton & Hove is £78. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It should be remembered that the £15 administration charge was agreed on the proviso that those on the waiting list would benefit from an improved service – achieved by ensuring the council’s planned IT administrative system works as effectively as possible for all users. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)