For context, Rob Walker asked for help in identifying ways to make the allotment service cost neutral. The operating deficit of the allotment service in 2015/16 was £37K. This deputation summarises BHAF’s response to that request, made on behalf of our members - allotment holders across the city. Our full response has been circulated to Cttee members & can be viewed on the BHAF website.

BHAF recognises the council’s budget pressures, and generally supports the view that allotments should be as self-sufficient as possible. However, we have practical reservations about whether allotments should or could be self-funding. For example, historically demand for allotments has seen peaks and troughs. If demand reduced by 50% next year, would rents for remaining allotment holders be doubled until demand rose again?

We need to protect access to allotments for all residents now & into the future. Our rents are already amongst the most expensive in the country. We note Cllr Theobald’s recent Independent article which observed that the saving achievable through a suggested 32% rent rise to cover the operating deficit is a false economy when such a rise could price residents out of accessing the physical, mental, health and environmental benefits allotments bring.

We do not feel continued salami slicing of small budgets such as ours provides significant impact on the council’s current, or sustainable solutions to the council’s long term, funding challenges.

Finally, our members have complained that presentation of 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, we cannot support a rent rise above inflation. However, we have already supported the introduction of a charge to join the waiting list and will support bringing retirement concessions in line with retirement age. These measures are forecast to reduce the operating deficit by £7K. We also feel eligible plot-holders should be able to opt into concessions rather than receiving them directly. Some (not all) of our members in receipt of age related concessions, for example, have stated that they don’t need them.

We also feel more could & should be done to make the service more efficient. Our biggest expense – at over £30K last year - is water. Meters have been installed at allotment sites, so it should be easy for the council to identify & remedy the leaks we all know contribute to this cost. At the same time we will work with members to reduce wastage. We feel there are ample opportunities for allotments to generate more income if the allotment service is proactive and imaginative in seeking them. If Committee agrees to pursue these opportunities, we will commit our help in return. And we urge the council to introduce efficient administration systems, designed in full collaboration with the site reps who could then use them to manage sites more efficiently.

On a related note, it should be remembered 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 reps. For some time we have had serious concerns about the professionalism with which the council sometimes treats these volunteers, and ask that Committee commit to working with BHAF to ensure this partnership improves over coming months. This will enable the council to continue to draw on that goodwill into the future for the benefit of all.

Our final request is that from next year, a new, income related concession is offered to ensure the low wage workers that allotments were originally meant to cater for are not priced out of allotments in future. This supports the council’s commitment to tackle in work poverty which we welcome.

And to close, it would be remiss not to record our appreciation for Rob’s efforts over the past year. And whilst BHAF is strictly apolitical and irrespective of his press articles, we have also appreciated Cllr Theobald’s support over the years. We hope to work with Rob and all members in future to secure the strongest future for the council, our city, our open spaces and our allotments.