

Allotment Lease Holder Consultation Outcome

(23/07/24)

Service and Consultation Lead: C. Chambers

Commercial Service Support Manager: A. Ziff

1. What is the update about?

This report is to update allotment holders on the outcome of the recent consultation.

The Public and Green Spaces (PGS) service carried out a consultation with allotment lease holders between the 26/01/24 and the 15/03/24 on proposed uplifts to fees and charges. The objective of this was to identify any avenues available to reduce allotment costs or increase income and support the service in becoming cost neutral.

Having received feedback from Associations, the consultation period was extended to meet the full consultation charter period, and to allow more time for allotment holders to provide formative feedback. FAQ including a full financial breakdown of budgets were also provided to support allotment holders in making formative suggestions.

Having received and reviewed the feedback provided, this report summarises the results and any subsequent opportunities identified to achieve a cost neutral service.

2. Background

Government funding cuts mean that the council must significantly reduce budgets. The council has committed to meeting the challenge of ongoing reductions in funding from central government and a budget reduction demand of £6.6m by 2026/27 through reducing costs, generating additional income and prioritising spend whilst maintaining statutory services.

To date, the PGS has reduced budgets by approximately £334,000 through identified service optimisations and/ or savings. However, to ensure that allotments continue to provide value-for-money, with an appropriate budget to support effective customers service and site management, investigations suggested that budget reductions were not a feasible option.

Instead, to continue to provide the same level of service, where reasonable and proportionate measures could be identified, PGS suggested to allotment holders that balancing income to meet outgoing costs through increased allotment fees, and making the service cost neutral, was likely to be the most sustainable route to ensuring a balanced budget.

However, PGS wanted to actively communicate and engage with allotment holders and seek their views on possible potential alternatives. We did this through the allotment fee consultation in which we asked allotment holders for suggestions that would provide income or cost reductions and reduce budget deficits.

3. Consultation results

General Overview:

The PGS team received 168 individual responses throughout the consultation period, from approximately 1533 allotment leaseholders in total: an 11% response.

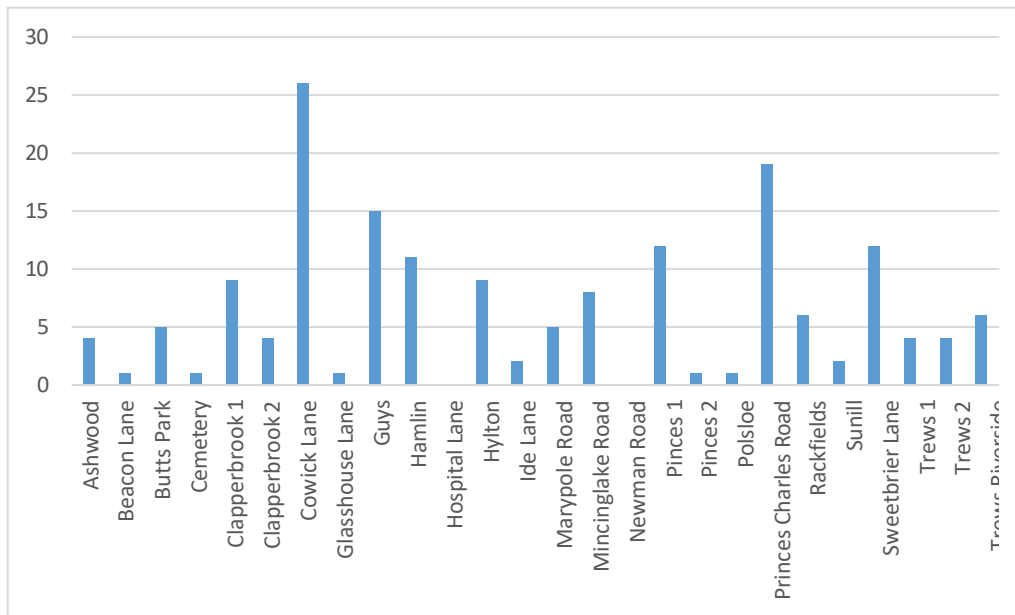
Of the responses received, 116 replied that for varying reasons they were opposed to an uplift and 52 stated they were not.

Individual responses were received from the majority of sites, however there was in general a higher number of responses from sites with an allotment association than without one.

There were two collective responses from St Thomas Allotment Association and Topsham Allotments and Gardens Society. It is recognised that these submissions were representative of a cross section of individuals across their respective sites. However, the consultation asked for formative ideas that could be investigated in regard of their feasibility. Because the feasibility of a suggestion is not influenced by the number of people raising it, collective submissions have been counted as one submission for the purpose of this feedback.

Any issues raised by individuals or Associations that fell outside the scope of the consultation were responded to directly and have not been considered within the consultation summary.

Fig. 2 Number of responses per allotment site



Consultation Results:

The consultation resulted in a total of eight considered and formative suggestions made by allotment holders with a view to supporting reduced costs or increased income. The feasibility of these were considered and the suggestion and assessments are outlined in the table below:

Table 1. Consultation feedback and assessment

No of Responses	Suggestion	Public and Green Space Response
1	Voluntary contribution on top of rent for those who are able.	<p>Although considered, voluntary contributions are not a financially sustainable solution for the service because they do not offer a reliable source of funding year on year. PGS must by law return a balanced budget and to do that income must be reliable.</p> <p>However, as a funding solution voluntary contributions or crowd funding can enable site enhancements by supplementing the existing budgets.</p> <p>If allotment holders have a project in mind and have identified volunteer or crowd funding opportunities, then the PGS team are happy to consider the project and its feasibility, and work closely with allotment sites to progress those projects where possible.</p>
9	Filling vacant plots in a timelier manner.	<p>Primarily the efficacy of the vacancy turnover procedure is reliant on the plot condition at the point of its surrender and the resource and cost implications of remedial work, and the availability of onsite volunteers.</p> <p>The current plot turnover rate is 72%. In the event that Turnover could be improved to 90% the potential income increase would amount to c.£3000. However, to achieve 90% resource demand would increase at a minimum rate of £33 an hour plus other costs (such as skips). As a result, the costs of delivering improved turnover will exceed available income.</p> <p>However, wherever we can improve vacancy turnover without significant costs increases we will do so.</p>
1	Additional fee for those bringing vehicles on site	Without a parking places order, or formal parking infrastructure this suggestion is not enforceable, and as a result it would not provide sustainable income value.
2	Reclaiming costs for plot clearance from previous tenant	We already attempt to reclaim costs where possible. This does not currently cover the costs of plot clearances.
4	Reduce admin staff in Council	Administration levels are determined by current demand. To reduce administrative costs that demand must reduce proportionately.

No of Responses	Suggestion	Public and Green Space Response
		<p>However, the administrative team do operate to capacity, and allotment holders have requested additional works to improve site management (maintenance and quality of service), improve turn over, and improve site enforcement.</p> <p>As a result, current administration levels will continue to be required and this will not provide feasible cost reductions.</p>
2	Pass more administration to sites to reduce Council admin costs	Wherever possible the service already passes work to allotment-based volunteers. Doing so supports the current level of resource.
2	Agree reduced water rates with SWW	<p>The council are subject to the same water rates as any other organisation. As a result, reducing water costs is only viable where we can provide less water on site.</p> <p>The Council are not eligible for the SWW community-based grants; however, Allotment holders can apply to SWW for a grant to improve sustainable water solutions. Neighbourhood fund South West Water</p> <p>This will not provide immediate cost reductions; however, it is environmentally significant, and if water costs could be reduced and reductions sustained significantly over a period of time, it could enable a review of the fees and charges at a later date.</p>
1	Provide quarter size plots	Current pricing structure means this would not offer any additional income. Currently two quarter plots would provide the same income as one half size plot.

No of Responses	Suggestion	Public and Green Space Response
4	Create a deposit scheme (up to a 3-month advanced payment)	<p>A deposit scheme would increase the immediate costs of an allotment.</p> <p>Limiting a deposit scheme to a 3-month advance payment would provide a £14.75 deposit per new allotment holder, or approximately £2500 a year based on the average number of new tenants we get annually.</p> <p>PGS would be required to hold these deposits and ringfence them from general use unless they were forfeited at the end of the lease. If the deposit was repayable, then we would simply return the monies to the customer. If the deposit becomes non-repayable, only at this stage would it become useable.</p> <p>Where forfeited, a deposit could conceivably be used to reduce allotment clearance costs. However, 2024/25 labour rates are a minimum of £33 an hour for two people, these are set to increase in 25/26 subject</p>
		<p>to national pay agreements. Therefore, costs for clearance would still significantly exceed available income.</p> <p>As a result, a deposit would not reduce costs, or provide a sustainable income.</p>

Concerns raised regarding proposals and existing service quality:

In addition to the formative feedback, there were 2 primary concerns raised through the consultation regarding a fee uplift:

- 1) There were 85 responses concerned that the uplifts were excessive.
- 2) and/or 59 responses were concerned about the impact of uplifts on the affordability of an allotment.

There were recommendations made directly by the allotment holders that considered reducing the impact of proposed uplifts and to make the service more affordable.

Recommendations that will be applied in the case of an uplift:

- **Spread payments by Direct Debit** – This is already available to allotment holders on request. You can spread payments across the year to reduce the amount you pay in one go.
- **Stagger the increase** – the Council agreed that this was reasonable to reduce the impact of the proposed increases, so any increase would be staggered over two years.

Recommendations made that could not be applied in the case of an uplift:

- **Have a reduced rate for those on lower income** – To ensure an equitable and evidenced procedure to managing a low-income concessionary arrangement,

administration would increase. This would put additional strain on the existing capacity of the service or increase administrative costs which would need to be recovered. As a result, the costs of the scheme outweigh the benefits.

Where individuals are passionate about growing schemes but prefer for personal reasons not to take on a formal allotment, consider that their allotment is no longer a sustainable expense for them, or decide to surrender their allotment for personal reasons, there are free community-based options available. The PGS team can sign post allotment holders to existing, or review requests for new, community garden schemes, community shrub beds, and or 'Friends Of' groups. Surrendering an allotment, or waiting on the waiting list, does not have to prevent individuals from developing their cultivation skills and or practicing them. There are free alternatives readily available on request.

Finally, 59 responses were concerned regarding the level of maintenance received for the cost of the proposed fees. In response we believe that the service remains a value for money provision, but we are committed to reviewing that. The allotments team will be developing an allotment management plan over the next 12 months. This will review and identify grounds maintenance requirements across all sites, built asset requirements, and resources and budget requirements for the delivery of the service as a whole. The service review will ensure that there is better transparency for allotment holders, will aid in prioritising built asset works, and ensure that our assets are managed as effectively as practicable within available budgets.

7. Conclusion

Action Points

The consultation was not able to provide sustainable alternatives to fees increase, however it did provide valuable feedback on the health and concerns relating to proposals. This feedback has been taken into account and will result in the following actions:

- Uplifts to allotment fees are necessary however these will be split out over 2 financial years. The first uplift will apply from September 1st, 2024.
- Allotments members will be made aware directly that monthly and quarterly payment arrangements are available.
- Where allotments can reduce water use significantly, water rate payments will be reviewed on a site-by-site basis in the future.
- We recognise that allotment holders want to see a transparent management programme for their sites to ensure the service provides value for money. To achieve this, we will deliver an allotment management plan that identifies maintenance requirements, built asset requirements, and identifies resources and budget requirements for the delivery of the service as a whole. The service review will ensure that there is better transparency for allotment holders, will aid in prioritising built asset works, and ensure that our-assets are managed as effectively as practicable within available budgets.

Fee uplift details

To remind allotment holders Allotments are measured in rods. 1 rod is the equivalent of 25 sq. metres. Allotments have varying sizes of plots from 2 rods to just over 10 rods, and so fees will vary for you depending on the size of your lease. Where allotment holders have need for further clarity on the direct impact of fees increases on their own lease, then the allotment team is happy to support allotment holders via:

Email on allotments@exeter.gov.uk,

Online contact portal [Contact us - Exeter City Council](#).

or via

Telephone 01392 262630.

And we will be putting a revised FAQ up on the website.

The amended fee proposal applies a 5% inflationary uplift (each year), with a uniform increase of £1.50 added on the rod price directly. As a result, any uplift in terms of fees is proportionate whether you have concessionary arrangements in relation to water or senior citizen fee.

In real terms the rod increases proposed 2024-25 increase translates to:

The cost of one rod will be £10.25 on a site with water (16p per month increase).

The cost of one rod on a site without water will be £8.50 (15p per month increase).

For any senior citizens that were lease holders prior to 2014 the rod price will be £5.90 (for the first 10 rods (250metres) only (14p per month increase).

Charges are payable in September, or on commencement of the tenancy. Tenancies commencing during the rent year will be charged a pro-rata rate.

In review of the impact on 2025/26 fees and charges:

Table 2. Fees and charge increase over 3 years.

From 1st September	Current Fees and Charges information			New Rates from 1st September 2024			Proposed rates from 1st September 2025		
	Net	VAT	Gross	Net	VAT	Gross	Net	VAT	Gross
Normal fee per 25 sq. metres (approx. 1 rod)	8.35	-	8.35	10.25	-	10.25	12.25	-	12.25
Senior Citizen per 25 sq. Metres (first 250 sq. metres only) applies only to existing tenants eligible before Sept 2014	4.20	-	4.20	5.90	-	5.90	7.70	-	7.70
Sites without water per 25 sq. metres (approx. 1 rod)	6.65	-	6.65	8.50	-	8.50	10.45	-	10.45