

## Allotments Service briefing

**The following briefing was requested by the Committee, to address some more general questions which were raised when a rent increase proposal was presented at the meeting of 14.11.2022**

The allotment service is a statutory function in the council and lies within the Parks and Countryside service, operating 5 days a week. The service manages approximately 3400 allotment plots across 80 sites, these vary hugely in scale and location. In comparison to other authorities our allotment provision is considered high, and the service is valued greatly by our communities who rely on them for food growing and a multitude of health and wellbeing benefits – made clear in COVID. Plots are leased to tenants who then take responsibility for them. There are currently approximately 3265 tenants. The service is almost fully funded by rents operating within an annual budget of c£310,000.

### **The Allotment Office is staffed Monday-Friday**

The phone line is open Monday-Friday, 9am-4pm (it has a queue system). Calls are answered by the Parks and Countryside Business Support Team (at no cost to the Allotment Office). The business support officers are trained to deal with simple allotment-related queries. More complex queries are referred on to a member of the Allotments team. The email inbox is regularly monitored during office hours.

The allotment office is staffed as follows:

Allotments Manager (Ceri Ashton), substantively full time, currently 3 days a week (notionally Monday, Wednesday, Friday, but with some flexibility)

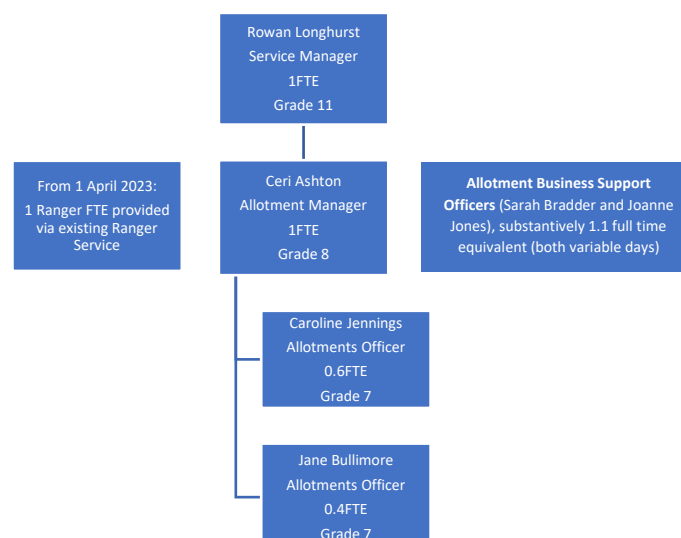
Allotment Officers (Caroline Jennings and Jane Bullimore), substantively 1 full time post combined (Caroline 3 days a week, Jane 2 days a week), currently 1.4 full time equivalent in total (Caroline 4 days a week: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Jane 3 days a week: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday)

Allotments Project Ranger (Bob Chowdry), full time (until 31 March 2023, after which the wider Ranger team will cover the allotment duties.)

Allotment Business Support Officers (Sarah Bradder and Joanne Jones), substantively 1.1 full time equivalent (both variable days)

The team is trained on all elements of the allotment services, but some queries need to be dealt with by officers specialising in that area. For most enquiries, any member of the team can help.

### **Organisational team structure (substantive posts)**



**We are a statutory service** We are required to provide plots if there is a demand for them. We seek to go beyond this, by providing sites of a high standard, and increasing provision where demand is high.

**Rents are set annually** We must give tenants one year’s notice of any rent increase. Consultation revealed that tenants prefer rents to be set one year at a time. The service is essentially self-funding. Rents typically go up in line with inflation. We consult with our advisory group, and sometimes with all tenants. Our rents for 2022/23 are set as follows:

	Plot Size up to 100m <sup>2</sup>	Plot Size up to 200m <sup>2</sup>	Plot Size up to 300m <sup>2</sup>	Plot Size 301m <sup>2</sup> or above	Parson Cross 1	Parson Cross 2	Pigeon loft (rent only)
Rent	£28.60	£58.10	£83.60	£124.40	£8.20	£14.30	
Water	£15.30	£31.60	£42.80	£53	£4.40	£7.70	
Total	£43.90	£89.70	£126.40	£177.40	£12.60	£22.00	£55.10

**Rent structures vary** Models for rent setting and site management vary for local authorities in South Yorkshire. Lots of factors affect our rents, the combination of which do not compare directly to other cities. For example, plot size, degrees of self-management, water provision, levels of concession, overall size of the service are all variables.

**Other South Yorkshire Authorities manage their sites differently** Barnsley are reviewing the management of their 69 sites, Rotherham have set up a new community benefit society called Rotherham Allotment Alliance (Ltd) where the authority will lease their sites to the Alliance and Doncaster operates a mix of self-managed (27) and directly managed (17) sites. The degree of investment through site improvements and administrative support varies.

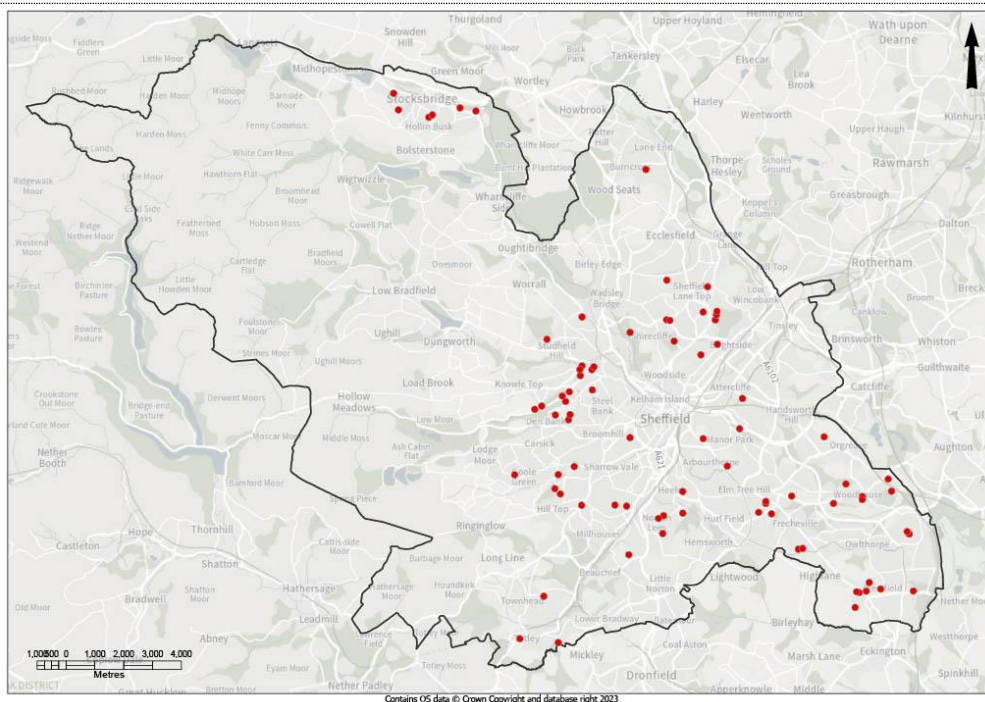
Rents annual costs are: **Barnsley** £82.17 if they have a water supply or £40.49 without water. **Doncaster** - cost £10.84 per 100 square metres. **Rotherham** – no information available

**Our concessions are generous** Although our rents are not the cheapest, our 75% concession for those on a low income is more generous than what most authorities offer, making allotments more affordable for those who might struggle most to pay. We also manage all our sites directly (no self-management).

**Demand is currently high** Demand for allotments surged during the pandemic, and remains high, across the whole of the city (with the longest waiting lists in the South West, and parts of the South and Central areas). During the pandemic, the waiting list soared from 400 to over 4000. It is currently around 2000. Occupancy is currently high, close to a record high for recent years: 3265 tenants; 96% occupancy of the lettable plots (the remainder are under offer). We also have 677 registered co-workers (people who help tenants on their plot but aren’t on the allotment lease).

**We face some significant challenges** We have some challenging sites, e.g. Shirecliffe, which would benefit from huge investment (beyond the scope of our budget). The current high rate of inflation is a challenge for our budget. Meeting the demand for allotments is an ongoing challenge, which we seek to address through rigorous inspections, splitting plots where possible, and creating new sites. The last site we created was in Beauchief in 2014, with a further potential site in Blackstock Road failing to progress in 2016 due to local opposition.

**Locations of sites across the city**



**We are always on the lookout for suitable new sites and bringing derelict plots back into use, but this can be costly**

We work with a number of colleagues within our own service to identify suitable potential new sites within Council ownership (purchasing land in the right locations is generally cost-prohibitive). Finding sites where we need them most is challenging; in general, there is more land available in areas of lower demand. Our newest sites are Parson Cross Family Gardens, Mickley Lane (Totley), Bracken Moor (Stocksbridge) and Beauchief. When we create new sites, we make the plots much smaller than traditional full-size plots, to have maximum impact on the waiting list, and because many people find them more manageable and ample for their needs. Alongside the information on demand (i.e. waiting list length), we would like work more closely with colleagues in other areas of the council to identify sites that help meet demand as well as wider health and environmental inequality. However, we recognise that there are multiple demands for sites and that there are challenges over taking land out of wider public use in Parks and other openly accessible green spaces.

We have some derelict plots which are unfit to let. Their condition varies. Some can be brought back into use. This can be costly, e.g., if significant tree work, vegetation clearance and rubbish removal is required. We take a strategic approach, reclaiming derelict plots if we are confident that they can be let and will continue to be let (demand for plots can fluctuate). The cost of clearance can be £100s or even over £1000. Payback is therefore slow, but maximising occupancy is still a goal.

**The allotment culture has always been strong**

There is a long and colourful heritage associated with allotments in Sheffield, and we've experienced a resurgence in demand in the last 15 years. Some of our allotments include pigeon lofts, a sport valued by dedicated community often going back generations.

**We engage with our customers in a range of ways**

Our advisory group (with representatives from allotment societies and Sheffield Allotment Federation) meets 3-4 times a year. We liaise regularly with allotment societies. When larger decisions need to be made, we invite all tenants to get involved (e.g., surveys or workshops).

**We are looking at how sites**

We do have a number of active allotment societies but none of these are responsible for managing sites. Historically we have not seen the appetite from societies to self-manage sites, but we believe this has changed and are exploring the options around this. We are

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**could be self-managed**

hugely grateful for the amount of time societies spend helping us with the smooth running of sites and welcome their thoughts on effective models of self-management.

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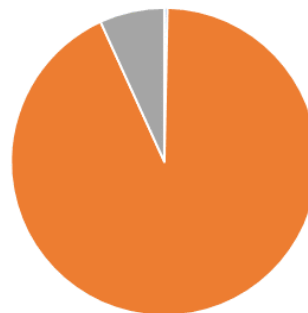
**Our budget largely goes on staffing and looking after the sites**

Our budget is c£310,000. Almost half of this pays for the allotment staff team. The remainder is spent on the allotment sites, e.g., provision of water, maintenance of access tracks, reactive repairs, locks and keys, tree work to reduce shade, clearance of derelict plots, and the annual site improvements.

Allotments budget spending 2021/2022



2021/2022 Allotment service income



■ Employees ■ Premises ■ Transport ■ Supplies and Services ■ Other rental income ■ Allotment Rental income ■ SCC Funding

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**We are reviewing our policies and strategies**

We are in the process of reviewing the council's allotment strategy, our policies and procedures, our tenancy agreement and our handbook, to ensure we reflect the current situation and challenges and setting out ways we can overcome these challenges and improve our service. We are giving a lot of attention to reviewing our policy on fires on allotments. More detail below.

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**Burning on our allotments**

We currently have a seasonal ban on burning which means fires are not allowed on any site between 1st May and 30th September, this was introduced in 2018 (to reduce complaints about nuisance). Following data collection at our largest site (Heeley and Meersbrook Allotments), alongside a green waste trial on another site. Have now begun consulting further before recommendations are made on proposed changes in our policy. We are consulting with experts (colleagues from Environmental Regulatory Services and a representative from Clean Air Sheffield) as well as our tenants. The Allotment Advisory group (which includes the Allotment Federation) has received an overview of initial findings (where different measures were used, and overall were not conclusive in terms of recommendations) in December 2022.

We welcome the Communities Parks and Leisure Committee's involvement in next steps on this policy, alongside other committees, and stakeholders. Regardless on the decision on burning we will continue to promote composting and recognise that there will not be a 'one size fits all' solution to green waste removal on all our sites.

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**We are well connected with other Local Authority Allotment services**

Our team is well respected across the area and well connected with other Local Authority Services. We regularly share experiences and seek advice on certain policies and approaches, for example policies on burning. We have been asked to share our experience on how we run our service by another South Yorkshire Authority which is reviewing their strategy and would like to learn more from us.

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**We are very busy, but we make a lot of people happy – Our customer**

During 2022 we received approximately 5700 phone calls and 26,552 emails to the allotment mailbox plus further emails directly to the allotment team.

Outcomes of our latest customer satisfaction survey (completed in 2018) were very positive. Overall, it was very encouraging tenants were very satisfied or fairly satisfied with their plot and site, with site security still needing to remain a priority, along with



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**satisfaction  
survey**

some issues around drainage and access to plots. Since the survey was completed we have worked with our finance team to introduce easier payment methods.

Communication with the office was stated as something that was done well and tenants felt that when they contacted the office the responses were clear at 90.5%, 9.5% said the response was not clear. The full survey outcomes can be viewed online or [here](#).

*'Allotments are the best thing about Sheffield now'*

*'My allotment my saviour'*

*'On behalf of all of us at Woodseats Allotment Society, thank you'*

*'Can I just take the opportunity to thank you, Caroline and the ranger for all your good work'*

*'All the correspondence I have had at any time with your department has always been very positive. You have all been so very helpful and kind'*

For further information on the above please contact:

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