

**Manchester City Council
Report for Information**

Report to: Environment, Climate Change and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Committee – 7 March 2024

Subject: Update on the Management and Provision of Allotments

Report of: Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods)

Summary

This report provides an overview of the provision and management of allotments in Manchester. It provides an update on the progress made in the delivery of allotments since the service was restructured in 2020 and outlines next steps to make further progress.

Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to consider and make comments on the information provided in the report.

Wards Affected: All

<p>Environmental Impact Assessment -the impact of the issues addressed in this report on achieving the zero-carbon target for the city</p>	<p>The report outlines the progress that has been made and the next steps to ensure that allotments play their full part in the reduction of carbon emissions and the capture of carbon through their landscapes. The report includes a focus on sustainable practise, incorporating the use of herbicides, water use and collection, food growing and waste, biodiversity and the management of land. There is also a specific focus with stakeholders on the Parks Climate Change Action Plan outlined in the next steps.</p>
<p>Equality, Diversity and Inclusion - the impact of the issues addressed in this report in meeting our Public Sector Equality Duty and broader equality commitments</p>	<p>The report includes an update on the implementation of Colony as a data management system, which allows key information to be reported in real time. This has enabled a baseline of key performance information to be established, including equality and diversity data from which progress will be tracked. The report also includes an update on actions that have been taken to ensure affordability, physical access and new ways of working, such as community plots that have been introduced to ensure there are a range of ways that</p>

	communities can engage with allotments and food growing experiences. Building from these strengths the report commits to a next step on the development of joint actions with stakeholders to ensure allotments and food growing opportunities are diverse and accessible.
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Manchester Strategy outcomes	Summary of how this report aligns to the Our Manchester Strategy/Contribution to the Strategy
A thriving and sustainable city: supporting a diverse and distinctive economy that creates jobs and opportunities	Allotments are partnering in new fruitful ways with organisations and communities to increase opportunities for personal development through volunteering, work experience, employment and training.
A highly skilled city: world class and home-grown talent sustaining the city's economic success	Allotments offer a unique opportunity to engage in educational activity in the natural environment. Opportunities to build life skills such as communication and teamwork are offered through a wide range of volunteering activity.
A progressive and equitable city: making a positive contribution by unlocking the potential of our communities	Allotments are at the heart of our communities, offering opportunities for community cohesion through volunteering, events and activities in a setting that is open and accessible to all.
A liveable and low carbon city: a destination of choice to live, visit, work	Allotments are an essential part of a neighbourhood and enhance the outcomes for residents and businesses. Whilst allotments naturally contribute to the low carbon city agenda, new ways of using and activating the estate in a way that can actively mitigate or contribute to lowering carbon emissions are being explored.
A connected city: world class infrastructure and connectivity to drive growth	

Full details are in the body of the report, along with any implications for:

- Equal Opportunities Policy
- Risk Management
- Legal Considerations

Financial Consequences – Revenue

None.

Financial Consequences – Capital

None.

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Background documents (available for public inspection): None

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update on progress towards improvement in the delivery of the Allotment Service. As well as providing an overview of the delivery of the service, current position and highlighting current opportunities and challenges, it specifically addresses areas including carbon reduction and ensuring that allotments are welcoming and accessible to all. It further outlines the proposed next steps in the delivery of the service for consideration.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Manchester's allotments are a unique resource. They are a distinctive component of the City's green spaces with significance for wildlife and as part of the urban fabric. Allotment gardening provides multiple benefits to individuals, communities and the wider environment. Whilst allotment gardening is about the production of good quality, fresh and low-cost food, allotments also provide the opportunity for a year-round healthy lifestyle which is active, socially inclusive and which reflects the ideals of sustainability and well-being. Allotments have a significant role to play in the protection and promotion of biodiversity. They represent an important opportunity for community interaction where social and other boundaries can be overcome.
- 2.2 There are 43 allotment sites across the city of Manchester, with a good geographical spread; 35 sites are managed by volunteer societies in partnership with the Allotment Lead; the remaining 8 sites are managed by the Council under the leadership of the Allotments Lead. Across the 43 Sites there are over 2,600 plot holders who have a tenancy agreement with the Council and pay an annual rent (Nov-October). In total, the service manages 247,057 square metres of allotment plots. A full list of sites is available in appendix 1.
- 2.3 Prior to the Parks Service restructure there was an inconsistent approach to managing the estate. Responsibility and roles had changed on a regular basis, which had led to some allotment rules and processes being applied inconsistently with limited quality assurance in place, as a result quality standards were being affected.
- 2.4 In 2017 the service began engagement with stakeholders, including site societies and individual plot holders to consult on the best approach going forwards to manage allotments. One of the most significant outcomes of this was the creation of the role of Allotment Lead sitting within and supported by the wider Parks service.
- 2.5 As a result of the consultation the Allotment Service has been focussed on improvement using the following 4 themes as a framework to help fulfil their full potential:
1. Improvement to the **management and administration** of allotment sites.
 2. Increasing **access to and use** of allotments and food growing spaces.

3. Improvement to the **quality of provision** to ensure allotment sites are welcoming and **accessible to all**.
 4. Ensuring **sustainable practise**.
- 2.6 In Spring 2020 the global Pandemic hit and severely disrupted progress towards the service's goals. Social distancing rules prevented a number of core activities required by the service to be able to drive standards forwards. This included site checks, maintenance work and general partnership work with allotment societies.
 - 2.7 In addition it created a further delay to the recruitment and appointment of the Allotment Lead, essential to leading the service delivery. When in post, it also meant that for the first year, the Allotment Lead needed to conduct 95% of their work online and through telephone calls, preventing the face-to-face contact essential to building partnerships critical to improvement.
 - 2.8 The cost-of-living crisis also created further pressures on the service as demand for plots has consistently increased. On 21 February 2024, there were 5,981 people on waiting lists across the city. This highlights both the need for and importance of allotments in Manchester and how critical it is to have good management and administrative processes in place to maximise the land managed for the provision of allotments.
 - 2.9 Through events beyond the services control, there have been several personnel changes since the role was created in 2020, resulting in three different officers being in post during that period. Each officer in the role has moved the service forward but there is no doubt that the inconsistency has hampered progress.
 - 2.10 A key reflection that has been captured through the development of this report has been the significant amount of work required by the service to address the basics, covered in section 3.1, on the management and administration of allotments. This has resulted in strong progress being made in areas that do not have a high level of visibility but have been critical in moving the service forward.
 - 2.11 Despite the challenges there has been significant progress. In February 2019 Manchester's allotment sites had 1,635 plot holders registered, in comparison, in February 2024 the number of plotholders has grown to 2,646, an increase of over 1,000 additional plotholders. The growth is largely attributable to a policy initiative to halve and sometimes quarter plots creating more capacity. Significant work has also focused on bringing decommissioned plots back in to use.
 - 2.12 During the pandemic interest in allotments peaked, combined with the inability to let plots due to limitations in meeting people outside of bubbles and social distancing, the national guidance was to close allotment waiting lists. During that period officers worked to review the application process to ensure that when wating lists were reopened they included an improved customer journey. In January 2023 allotment waiting lists were reopened and individuals were

able to apply online for the first time. This was a significant step forwards given some site lists had been closed for some time prior to this point. The ability to apply online has made the process of registering interest in a plot much simpler, transparent and the service more accessible as a result. For individuals who do not have access to the Council website, they can apply by visiting their nearest allotment site.

3.0 Progress against Allotments Objectives

3.1 Improvement to the management and administration of allotment sites

- 3.1.1 **Partnerships with Societies** - Across Manchester's allotments there are 35 Societies all run and managed by volunteers. Such groups are essential to the day-to-day management of their sites and contribute significantly to maintaining and improving quality standards. Sites that have shops selling produce to plot holders and local residents are also managed and run by volunteers.
- 3.1.2 Allotment societies traditionally consist of a number of ploholders from each site coming together to provide coordination and management for their sites. Societies are passionate and advocate strongly for their community exemplifying all that is good about volunteering.
- 3.1.3 Given the sprawling nature of allotment sites and the resources the service has at its disposal to manage them, partnerships with societies are essential to maintaining and improving quality standards. They provide on the ground day to day basics that deliver the service such as being the first point of contact for enquiries and reporting defects, as well as reporting on the overall direction and health of sites.
- 3.1.4 Allotment societies also play a vital role in the management and allocation of plots on Manchester sites. In partnership, they administer waiting lists, allocate plots, conduct plot checks, manage non-compliance and support invoicing and financial management. In many cases, societies, supported by the Allotment Lead and wider colleagues have been able to successfully bid for additional funds to further develop their sites.
- 3.1.5 The delivery of a successful allotment service is dependent on maintaining a good partnership relationship with over 100 volunteers who make up allotment societies. These individuals, supported by the Allotment Lead, through information and guidance, provide an ever-improving quality standard from which ploholders and the wider Manchester community benefit.
- 3.1.6 **Management of animals** - The only animals permitted to be kept on allotment sites are chickens and bees. The service works with Trading Standards and Environmental Health and has established a way to manage any deviation from the rules whilst ensuring all animals currently being housed are done so in appropriate conditions.

- 3.1.7 Plotholders must request permission to keep chickens and bees to enable correct record keeping across the sites, this includes advising the Council of the number and what shelter / accommodation they will be kept in. Allotment societies are also consulted by both the plotholder and Allotments Lead to ensure agreement across all areas before the animals are introduced.
- 3.1.8 The Service will continue to review animals on plots, and in the event of non-compliance serve notice for them to be removed. If this is not adhered to the service will look to evict the plotholder and charge a fee to move the animals and hold them until an agreement can be made.
- 3.1.9 The approach above, implemented in early 2023 was in reaction to a number of inconsistencies across the estate where additional animals were being kept. This has provided transparency and clarity supporting allotment societies running of their sites and improving standards.
- 3.1.10 **Management of waiting lists** - Allotments are in high demand with waiting lists currently containing 5,981 applicants collectively. Applications are spread across all sites with the largest waiting list at 352 for a site in South Manchester and the smallest waiting list at 85 for a site in North Manchester.
- 3.1.11 Allotment societies and the Allotments Lead manage waiting lists together, allotment societies contact applicants when they have vacant plots, giving applicants 30 days to respond to invitations. Applicants who fail to respond are closed, however can be reopened if they contact Manchester City Council within a reasonable timescale. This approach has already significantly reduced lists whilst not impacting on those wanting to remain on the waiting list.
- 3.1.12 Prior to this, waiting lists had over 7,500 individuals registered and thus over 1,500 people have in effect been removed as they no longer wishing to take up a plot.
- 3.1.13 The service is also currently actively engaged in conversations with internal partners regarding land that could be utilised for growing to reduce some of the demand, the service will continue to explore all possibilities.
- 3.1.14 **Management of plotholders** - All plots are subject to inspections by both the Council and allotment societies, these are undertaken at least monthly on society run sites and quarterly on Council run sites. Inspections take place to ensure that plot holders are adhering to both their allotment tenancy and the allotment rules.
- 3.1.15 Allotment users found to not be adhering to these rules are given improvement notices. These notices work as follows:
- Stage 1 improvement notice - gives the user 28 days to make improvements based on the requests of the notice. If the user doesn't comply or make an effort to improve the plot, they are placed on a stage 2 improvement notice.

- Stage 2 improvement notice - gives another 28 days to make a significant improvement on the plot. On the expiry of the notice if there hasn't been a satisfactory improvement, they are progressed to eviction and a notice to vacate the plot issued.
- Appeal – an appeal is able to be made against the eviction notice which is reviewed by the Strategy Manager for Parks.

3.1.16 Whilst the eviction of ploholders is a last resort this is necessary to ensure compliance with the allotment / green book rules and regulations and to maximise the use of allotment space. Over the last 12 months over 30 ploholders have been evicted for non-compliance with allotment rules.

3.1.17 **Management and administration of data** - The Colony system has helped to bring the administration of allotments in to one place. This has been a significant factor in driving forwards service delivery as processes are streamlined and information more readily available to both the Allotment Lead and societies.

3.1.18 Furthermore, previous systems relied on physical records and manual processing. The use of Colony both removes some of the risk of human error and speeds up the process of dealing with issues. The best example of this is shown in the letting process, where waiting lists are freely available and transparent, with new applicants added in the order of the applications as they are received. This results in plots being reallocated quicker whilst ensuring the right process / order is followed.

3.1.19 The Colony system also allows the service to be able to quickly review and answer freedom of information enquires and complaints in a timely, transparent and accurate manner and is consulted in such cases.

3.1.20 A key component of the system when it was introduced was how it was able to interact with Manchester City Council's payment system, making the payment of rent both more accurate and clearer to the service user. The system has the ability to quickly produce charging information and forecasts that simplify processes and provide information to ploholders.

3.1.21 Colony is a vast system, and it is estimated that the service are currently using a small proportion of its potential. This is something the service intend to explore further in the coming months. Below is a synopsis of what the system currently supports:

- Waiting lists – as above providing up to date waiting lists to allotment societies and providing applicants with their waiting list position.
- Rents / Invoicing – Processing data to spreadsheets to invoice ploholders' annual rent.
- Keep allotment site ploholders up to date to ensure billing is correct and ploholders are adhering to the green book rules.
- KPI's – reports to review KPI's on performance across each site including vacant plots, applicants per site, new tenants etc.

3.1.22 Over the last 12 months, the service has had 3 Freedom of Information requests all regarding waiting list times and length of waiting lists. One formal complaint has been raised and has been successfully resolved.

3.2 Increasing access to the use of allotments and food growing spaces

3.2.1 As part of the commitment to equality and diversity, allotments offer concessions to plot holders that are over 60, have a disability, are unemployed or on universal credit. This provides an opportunity for applicants on low income to be able to access the service. In addition, the service offers numerous accessible plots to meet the varied access needs of new and existing plot holders.

3.2.2 Waiting lists are currently open with no sites closed to new applications. In early 2023, the application system to become a plot holder was opened on the Manchester City Council website. The website has translation and accessibility services that further improves accessibility.

3.2.3 There are multiple sites already hosting community plots and the service is further supporting allotment societies to create more spaces to host community growing projects. In addition, the service is supporting the creation of plots for local schools to teach children the benefits of growing fruit and vegetables and health and wellbeing programmes.

3.2.4 The Allotments Service has a good geographical split across the city of Manchester, with all residents living within short travelling distance of their nearest allotment site.

3.2.5 In terms of gender 55.1% of plot holders are male whilst 44% are female representing a good balance. The further 0.9% is accounted for by plot holders where information is not held. 68.5% of plot holders are registered as over 60 compared to 31.5% under that age. Whilst there is further energy required to engage with a younger audience there is recognition that these statistics have moved in a positive trend from a respective 72% and 28% 5 years ago.

3.2.6 In March 2023 the service started to document the number of notices administered, since this date 150 improvement notices have been issued, with 33 of these leading to eviction or surrender of the plot.

3.2.7 The service has also engaged in partnership working with external partners such as Sow the City to help the Growing Manchester programme with an aim to establish growing groups across the city. Working with Community Payback to help maintain sites and develop interest from “volunteers” where they can register on waiting lists and register with Growing Manchester and direct them to local groups. The service has also helped to identify additional land opportunities not in allotments to establish growing groups and repurpose land.

3.3 Improvement to the quality of provision to ensure allotment sites are welcoming and accessible to all

- 3.3.1 Site checks and inspections are undertaken by societies and Council staff to ensure safety and identify maintenance issues on allotment sites. This also ensures plotholders and sites in general are adhering to rules and regulations of the allotments handbook. Where issues arise, these are noted, and action taken to rectify issues either by appointing appropriate contractors or by contacting the relevant plotholder / society for resolution. All of this contributes to picking up issues that would previously have taken longer to identify and therefore drives forward quality standards and plotholders experience of the service.
- 3.3.2 Each of the sites are checked regularly for a variety of health and safety risks such as Legionnaires, utilities and building maintenance. Additional inspections are undertaken where there are specific concerns, a recent example of this being that the team led on checking the estate for the potential of RACC building materials, quickly establishing there were none. This further demonstrates the commitment to providing the best standards possible.
- 3.3.3 Where health and safety issues have become problematic with anti-social behaviour or illegal activity on access roads to allotments affecting the quality of the service, the service has collaborated with colleagues across Neighbourhoods to access the target hardening fund to successfully implement restrictive measures across several sites.
- 3.3.4 An example of this is at French Barn Lane where fly tipping on the access road to the site had constantly blocked access to the plotholders and contractors causing works to be delayed. A Target Hardening application was made to install a vehicle barrier at the start of the access road off French Barn Lane with a coded padlock to prevent fly tipping and illegal activity, with additional kick rails installed along the grass verges to prevent vehicular access from non-plotholders.
- 3.3.5 The allotments estate has been reviewed to identify any long-standing maintenance issues impacting quality standards as part of identified alternative funding that is available to the wider service. A list has been created which details potential repair and upgrade of infrastructure for prioritisation across the service.
- 3.3.6 **Utilising existing resources to increase access to growing** - As a way to manage waiting lists, some societies have halved existing plots, this has proved successful doubling the number of plots on sites and helping to reduce the waiting lists. This is something the service has encouraged as a large number of applicants don't have the time to spend looking after a sizeable allotment plot, halving and in some cases quartering the plots has helped to bring in a different demographic of users according to allotment societies. This is something the team is looking to encourage further this year where sites have the capability to halve or quarter plots to further reduce waiting lists.

- 3.3.7 There is some evidence that halving or quartering plots has also helped to reduce issues around compliance as sites where this plot management has happened have had a significantly smaller number of stage 1 and 2 notices served.
- 3.3.8 A number of sites have community plots where they have several different uses, some sites use these community plots to have open days, encouraging local residents who don't have the time to have a plot but can benefit from communal growing schemes to produce and use locally grown fruit and vegetables. Other sites use their community plots as community orchards, apiaries, or communal poly tunnels where sites have smaller plots.

3.4 Ensuring sustainable practise

- 3.4.1 **Use of herbicides** - Herbicides are not used as standard practice at any allotment site across Manchester by the Council. This is with the exception of treating invasive species such as Japanese Knotweed where specialist contractors are typically engaged. The wider parks service has also trialled alternative methods of treatment such as thermo-electric treatment of knotweed with promising results, as a result alternative methods will be a key consideration in the future management of invasive species.
- 3.4.2 The majority of society run shops across allotment sites have also embraced this approach by not selling glyphosate products and the service will continue to work on a programme of education and information around this. The development of good practise guides and case studies are being considered as a next step, as well as the potential to add this commitment into ploholders' terms and conditions in the future.
- 3.4.3 **Water collection and use** - As a trial approach, water usage is currently being monitored at Brighton Grove allotments by United Utilities. As part of the trial they have changed the taps at the site to push taps which are designed to limit the use of water and the attaching of hose pipes. The site has also had several rainwater harvesting water butts installed to further reduce the demand on the regular supply. The service is currently waiting on data to see how successful this pilot project has been with a view to rolling it out further.
- 3.4.4 Nearly all allotment sites currently utilise some form of water storage system with societies fully engaged and supportive of the approach. Should the trial above prove successful there may be scope to review a large project to roll out large water butts utilising alternative funding streams.
- 3.4.5 Nearly all allotments societies have solar panels producing green electricity. There are also several examples of societies moving away from petrol powered maintenance equipment to electric power. The service is supporting these initiatives where possible and encouraging other sites to make similar adjustments.
- 3.4.6 **Food growing and waste** - There are currently 20 active food growing groups across 18 allotment sites within the estate which help teach ploholders and

residents practical growing skills, increasing awareness of how food production relates to climate and ecology. The Service will continue to implement this approach where possible allocating at least one plot across each site for a Growing Manchester plot.

3.4.7 Allotment societies and ploholders are keen to ensure there is as little food wastage as possible across allotments this has resulted in partnership work with local foodbanks with the following positive examples:

- **Bradley Fold Allotments** - The allotment society delivered produce grown by the ploholders to 6 foodbanks / charities this year including, The Oasis Centre, Chelwood Church, Wellspring Centre, Caritas Cornerstone Day Centre, Church of the Apostles, Perry's Pantry.
- **Scott Avenue Allotments** - Work with Chorlton Bike Deliveries who collect surplus fruit and veg every Monday during the growing season and deliver it to Emmeline's Pantry.
- **Cleveleys Avenue Allotments** – The Society have built up regular weekly donations between March and October. The selection is seasonal, ranging from rhubarb in the spring through to squashes, marrows and apples in the autumn. They have supported the development of the Pankhurst plot where women supported by Emmeline's can garden, can grow their own food but also benefit from the calm that working in a garden can provide.
- **Ivygreen Allotments** - Each year Ivygreen adopt a local charity for their fundraising. They have a plant sale each year and proceeds from selling the plants go to a local charity. The proceeds from the "auction" at the end of the Annual Show also go to the charity. Last year it was Chorlton Good Neighbours and they received over £500.
- **Northenden Allotments** - Northenden Allotments held a stall on the day of the Great Northenden Boat Race which took place last August. Members donated produce from their plots together with all kinds of homemade jams, chutney, cakes, etc. They do this each year and the new committee pulled out all the stops that day and made quite a significant contribution to the Christie Foundation from the proceeds. In addition, they also gave much of the produce (mainly vegetables and fruit) to the local foodbank which is set up by one of the ploholders. We understand that they were very happy to receive fresh produce. The Society aim to do this again this year and they are also planning an open day to invite members of the public to take a look at what they do.
- **Crumpsall and Cheetham Hill Model Village** - Worked with North Ridge High School, giving them some space on the communal poly tunnel and communal growing plot to grow produce and understand how to grow their own veg.

3.4.8 The majority of allotments operate volunteer run shops on their sites. They use these facilities to sell excess fruit and vegetables to the local communities at a reduced price.

3.4.9 This approach is actively supported and encouraged by the service for its dual benefits. It is a positive way of reducing food wastage whilst also benefiting

the local community by improving cohesion and providing an affordable fresh food source during difficult economic circumstances.

4.0 Next steps

- 4.1 Utilising the framework set out in section 2.5 there is a commitment to continued improvement in the delivery of allotments across the City. The role of allotment societies in continued improvement cannot be overstated and the Council values their contribution massively.
- 4.2 The commitment to continue to support allotment societies through a strong partnership approach that values strong communication and shared high standards is key. To support this, the service will seek to set up a stakeholder group made up of societies, allotment service personnel and other partners to discuss and share best practice in key areas of allotment management.
- 4.3 The service will seek to finalise and agree terms and conditions of an “allotment societies agreement” which will provide clarity, guidance and consistency across the estate as part of the approach outlined in section 4.1.
- 4.4 The service will set up a working group comprising of societies and the Allotment Lead to discuss and set actions building on the already significant work that has gone in to making allotment sites diverse and accessible.
- 4.5 The Allotments Lead will continue to work with societies, council colleagues and other stakeholders to identify and use external funding to further improve quality standards. This will consider the priority list that is being drawn up for the service.
- 4.6 The service will set up a working group, comprising of societies and Allotment Lead to discuss and set actions that contribute towards the wider Parks Climate Change Action Plan. This will have a specific focus but not limited to, water usage, the use of herbicides, biodiversity, reduction of food waste and the use of single use plastics.
- 4.7 Allotments will continue to work with partners to identify additional land that might be suitable for food growing opportunities to meet additional demand. In addition, the service will continue to encourage the strategy of halving and quartering plots where appropriate to build extra capacity.

5.0 Recommendations

- 5.1 Consider and make comments on the information provided in the report.

6.0 Appendices

- 6.1 Appendix 1 – Allotment Sites