

Paper for Finance discussion sept 2015 Rent review From A place to grow 2010

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12 Resourcing allotments

The allotments strategy should also address the issue of how the acquisition, upgrading and management of sites is to be financed on a sustainable basis.

The only regular source of revenue obtained from most allotment sites is rental income. We address the detailed issues surrounding rent-setting in part 3 of this guide. In strategic terms, however, the key issue that the allotments strategy needs to address is whether current expenditures on outlays such as water supply, day-to-day maintenance and administration should be covered from rental income, or whether the running costs of the service should be subsidised. The argument in favour of the self-financing model is that it is more sustainable, provided that the level of rent does not in itself become a deterrent to the use of allotments. The argument in favour of the subsidised model is that allotments are a leisure service like any other, but of particular significance to the retired and to low income groups. One means of reconciling these two models is to target subsidies through rent concessions, which are permitted under allotments law. As we noted in part 1, allotments can face serious funding problems, partly because they rank low on the agenda within many local authorities, and partly because plotters often resist even modest increases in rents.

Funds for capital improvements can be difficult to obtain, but may be essential if the promotion of allotments is to be effective. This is where engagement with other people's priorities can be particularly important, to reinforce the case for greater resource allocations from the local authority, and also to access grant funding from outside bodies. The latter may be obtained to enhance the services provided on allotment sites for particular groups such as people with a disability, or to enhance the quality of the allotment site as an open space (examples of external funding sources are given in part 3 of this guide). There is an alternative (or indeed complementary) route to better quality provision and lower running costs however, and that is through schemes for devolved management, an issue taken up in the next section. One other means of raising capital for allotments is through the reinvestment of funds generated from the rationalisation and disposal of sites. In fact, two exemplary promotion campaigns (in Bristol and Birmingham) have been partly financed in this way. It is clear, however, that this strategy can only work where the inheritance of allotment provision exceeds any conceivable expansion in demand (through changed economic conditions or realisation of latent demand), and where conversion to uses which might generate capital receipts is not prevented by covenants or planning restrictions. The latter are particularly significant in the context of PPG17, which prioritises conversion to other green-space uses where there are local deficits. Statutory allotments cannot be sold off simply because the remaining plotters want better facilities and a developer hopes to get planning permission for building on redundant land: disposal depends on a demonstrable absence of demand, despite adequate promotion of the facilities on offer.

fixing of rents

In most cases rent will be the only income derived from an allotment site and expenditures will be manifold. These will include not only site maintenance and repair but also administrative costs and promotion. They cannot be sustained without adequate finance. The level of rent should be set so that, together with other available funds and incomes, there is sufficient funding to meet both present and projected needs of the site or portfolio of sites. Otherwise the quality of sites and facilities will inevitably suffer. Although allotment rents are generally low, even small rises may provoke fierce criticism and sometimes threats to vacate plots. Many plotters are unaware of

the true costs of providing allotment sites and maintaining facilities and so information outlining those costs may be useful in allaying such criticisms. In some cases ploholders may be willing to pay for the better facilities and promotion that will ensure that sites remain full. Keeping rents low under these circumstances prevents the development of the site to its true potential. Where raising rents is not a viable option, encouraging ploholders to accept devolved management arrangements would be appropriate to help reduce costs.

When fixing the allotment rent the following factors therefore need to be considered

- : • long-term financial sustainability
• the nature, quality and cost of facilities provided (and desired);
• expenditure on promotion and administration;
• the present level of rent and its historic tradition;
• the likely effect of rent levels on plot take-up.

For the sake of comparability the following factors may also be useful:

- the level of allotment rents in surrounding areas;
- the level of agricultural rent in the area;
- charges to users of other outdoor recreational or leisure activities provided by the authority.

In addition, if the strategy is for the self-financing of allotments... ... there is a need for accrual of funds for future capital expenditure or maintenance programmes relating to the allotment sites. This assumes that the allotment site is in a fully maintained condition and does not require any immediate expenditure, and that accrual of funds is for maintenance or replacement work that would be carried out in the normal course of events, such as the eventual renewal of gates or fencing.

rent concessions

Rent concessions are permitted by allotment law and are granted by many councils to retired and unemployed tenants and occasionally to those who have held plots for a long time. Concessions should be considered as a method of promoting allotments to those most in need of the health and economic benefits that may be derived from allotment gardening.

rent collection. Most allotment rents are paid in advance. However, Section 10 of the 1950 Allotments Act states that if the yearly rent exceeds twenty five shillings (£1.25) (7) then it is not permissible to provide for more than one quarter's rent to be payable in advance. Clearly, if this condition were applied it would cause higher costs and inconvenience, so rent is normally paid in advance by agreement between the tenant and the authority. This is set out in the tenancy agreement.

renewal dates

Although in the past the traditional date for renewal of allotment tenancies has been March 25 this date has no legal significance. A renewal date in the autumn provides the allot rents manager with details of ploholders who do not intend to renew their tenancies and hence the number and location of vacant plots. This gives ample opportunity for preparation of the plots for new tenants. An autumn renewal date is also likely to be convenient if tenants pay their rents to allotment associations, since allotments are still very active at this time and association secretaries may thus find it easier to contact their members.

other sources of funding

Although rents – and subsidies from council tax revenues – are usually the only regular forms of income for allotments, funding for specific projects or equipment may be found from a number of different sources.

Substantial if sporadic funding may be available from disposals (see part 2.3), which must be applied to securing replacement sites or improving the remaining portfolio.

Funding for new sites can be secured through Section 106 agreements with developers: this is how new allotments have been funded at Cambourne in Cambridgeshire

(www.cambourneparishcouncil.gov.uk/?q=node/34).

Other types of funding will only be available to associations and will require that general charitable objectives be met. Ancillary benefits from funded projects (such as improvements to access and security) can help improve the site as a whole, however, and enhance the enjoyment of all ploholders, not just the direct beneficiaries of the project itself. The allotment manager should become familiar with the different and diverse means of funding available and should make use of them when appropriate. They should also be able to help and advise ploholders, allotment associations and groups using allotments of where to seek funding of their own. Frequently, those involved in the voluntary sector are very aware of many of the schemes that provide grants, and good communication between the allotment manager and such groups will be beneficial to all. It can be a big step for an allotment association to start fundraising. Not only is there much to learn, but there may also need to be significant changes to the way the association is constituted, the standards of both democratic and financial accountability to which it conforms, and the overall quality of governance, particularly if large sums are sought. Funders may require place to cover such issues as equal opportunities and environmental impacts. These are matters on which the allotments manager may advise – or signpost sources of advice and expertise available elsewhere. The network of Allotments Regeneration Initiative Mentors can offer advice and sample documents from volunteers who have been successful in raising funds for their own sites, and have personal knowledge from the inside of the pitfalls which associations should avoid.

Specific and wide-ranging advice on fundraising for allotments is available in the ARI information pack A Guide to Fundraising for Allotment Associations, which is available as a free download from the ARI website at www.farmgarden.org.uk/ari. The pack also includes advice on reducing the need for money through recycling, the use of volunteer labour, and ways of generating additional income (within the limits imposed by the Allotment Acts), such as sales of produce, trading huts, events and social enterprises.

For additional advice on both national and local sources of grant funding, as well as training and practical support in completing applications, the local office of the Council for Voluntary Services (CVS) should be the first port of call, particularly when associations are involved which have little previous experience of fundraising: (www.navca.org. uk).

Up-to-date information on grants available to charities and community groups can also be accessed through dedicated funding websites:

GRANTfinder: www.grantfinder.co.uk

FunderFinder: www.funderfinder.org.uk

The following are examples of funding sources that have a track record of approving grants to allotment associations for allotment projects.

Awards for All

Awards for All is a lottery grants programme aimed at local communities throughout the UK.

Grants of between £300 and £10,000 are available to support participation in art, sport, heritage and community activities, and projects that promote education, the environment and health in the local community. Applications can be made at any time. The application form is short and simple, and the outcome is given to the applicant within eight weeks. (www.awardsforall.org.uk)

Local grant-making trusts

There are almost 10,000 UK grant-making trusts, the vast majority of which are small and give out a few thousand pounds per grant. By linking up with the local CVS applicants can research which trusts have criteria that suit their funding needs. This usually results in several applications being made for small amounts, but these amounts can add up to a substantial income for a specific project or theme.

B&Q

B&Q's Better Neighbour Grant Scheme provides £50 to £500 (at retail cost) of B&Q materials; for example, pond liners, plants, and peat-free compost or paints labelled low or minimal VOC for redecoration projects. There must be evidence of commitment from the applicants and from the local community to the project. Application is easy: contact is made via B&Q stores. The site of the project must however be within 12 miles of a B&Q store.

support in kind

Some commercial organisations are happy to provide 'support in kind' to worthwhile projects, and many (such as BT) have staff volunteering schemes that can supply willing (and very able) helpers. Approaches to suitable local businesses with well thought-out sponsorship proposals may pay dividends when particular items are required, not least through the positive publicity for allotments in local media that donations can generate.

Of course, sometimes materials alone are not enough: extra hands are required too, particularly for regeneration projects. Organisations such as the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (www.btcv.org.uk) are happy to assist with projects which provide environmental benefits. In some places fruitful approaches have been made to the probation service, which can provide offenders on community service orders with an opportunity to contribute to the wellbeing of allotments through work on construction and maintenance, under appropriate supervision.

bringing it all together ...

Past experience suggests that the most successful associations have accessed funding and support in kind from a variety of sources, on the principle that small amounts of money or goods can soon add up to a sum that can transform a site. This approach seems to work better than large, one-off applications to highly competitive funding schemes, where allotment associations can be at a disadvantage compared to general environmental, health or education projects that can more easily prove a wider circle of beneficiaries.

Applications for small grants (especially to local funders) usually involve less paperwork and reporting, and may require fewer compromises in order to meet the funder's criteria.