

Report from Allotment Forum 13.11.18

Colin Bedford and Di Appleyard National Allotment Society of Leisure Gardeners

Attended with Sue Thornhill

This was a very useful day spent discussing management of allotments. It was attended by several allotment managers from across Shropshire.

Number of Plots

Allotment Society guidance is that 20 plots are needed for every 1000 households

Wem Town Council currently has 56 plots and as the total dwellings in Wem 3733 (2011 census) we are probably slightly short of the number of plots recommended for a town of this size. In addition to this we have a 2 year waiting list for those wanting plots.

As larger plots become vacant these are split into 2 to provide smaller plots and to reduce the waiting list. However with the expansion of the burial ground more plots will be lost which will mean that ultimately the town will have a reduced number of allotment plots for a larger population.

Recommendation

The Council should bear this in mind when commenting on planning applications for new developments and possibly include the need for additional allotment provision in the Place Plan.

Land Classification

There is a need to find out how the land that the Town Council's allotments are on is classified. There are 3 types of classification

- **Statutory allotments** - Land acquired by Councils to be used for allotments, cannot be sold or used for other purposes without the consent of the Secretary of State
- **Temporary allotments** - Land acquired for other use such as Cemeteries or Housing but used as allotments in the meantime – it is assumed that Wem Town Council's allotments are temporary as the primary use of the land is as a burial ground. However research into past council minutes will confirm this as after a quick search I am unable to find any historical land use information on the land found in the files held in the office so assume the information is held with Hatchers or at Shropshire Records Office.
- **Private allotments** - Land owned by individual or organisation e.g. farmer, charity, church or trust.

Recommendation

That the Town Council's position is clarified.

Health and Safety

I raised the problem we have with the paving slabs that have lifted and asked how other Councils managed paths between plots. Most seemed to have earth paths between plots. However they also took the view that the plot holder was responsible for the path to the right hand side of the plot and it was suggested that the Town Council could write to plot holders informing them of this and offering to remove the slabs if they did not want them.

The generic risk assessment is being updated following discussions with Shropshire Council

Recommendation

That the Committee consider passing responsibility for maintenance and management of paths between plots to the tenant of the plot immediately to the right of their plot (location to be marked on plan).

Tenancy Agreements

The Town Council's tenancy agreement is based on SLCC's model agreement. However the following problems have been found with it

- The agreements requires the Town Council to give tenants 12 months notice of any price increase.
- Notice to quit still requires the Town Council to give 3 months notice to the tenant which can mean that it can take 6 months to evict a tenant for non cultivation. This can be frustrating for the Town Council and neighbouring plot holders as the plot become more and more overgrown.

Recommendation

That the Committee adopt a new tenancy agreement template is adopted to address these issues.

Rent Setting

A long discussion took place on rent setting and it was evident that allotments are not cost neutral to the council.

NSALG recommends that a separate fixed admin fee is charged to tenants each year alongside the rent fee. Currently the cheapest plot to rent is £10 a year which is a quarter of the cost of a full plot, however admin costs for full and quarter plots are the same e.g regardless of size of plot the time administrating annual rent letters and inspection visits is the same.

Recommendation

That the Town Council consider charging a fixed admin fee of £5 per plot

The Town Council starts to charge new entrants onto the waiting list a non refundable admin fee of £5.

Communication

It is important to improve communication with plot holders and this can help to deal with any minor problems early. It is important to find a cost effecting way of doing this.

Recommendation

That the Town Council sends out an annual newsletter with the rent review letter with information on the allotments and make plot holders aware of expected cultivation standards at the start of the year and to inform tenants of issues that may have cropped up in the previous year e.g complaints about bonfires/ parking / non cultivation etc.

The Town Council considers the provision of a noticeboard for the allotments

Look at the development of a handbook for new tenants

Non cultivation

Non cultivation is a common problem and is particularly problematic with new tenants. Suggestions to combat this problem include

- 3 month probationary period for new tenants
- Offering second year rent free for plots that are taken on in a particularly poor state
- Amending tenancy agreement to make the process of serving notices to quit quicker.

Recommendation

That the Town Council consider setting the following cultivation standards.

All plots must be cultivated in a way that does not interfere with the enjoyment of neighbouring tenants throughout the growing season, Plot holders are expected to maintain the cultivation standards over 25% of the plot within three months of the start of the tenancy and 75% by the end of the first year and on all subsequent years unless the council agrees otherwise.

- Removal of weed seed-heads before the seed has set
- Control of pernicious weeds, such as those that spread through the extension of roots, (eg. Couch grass and ground elder) or by generating new plants from growing tips in contact with the soil (eg. Brambles);
- Removal of long grass or detritus that is likely to harbour slugs and snails (which may forage next door)
- Keeping paths free of hazards to allow free and unimpeded access and to ensure grass paths are trimmed.
- Removal of waste, noxious or hazardous materials

If there are personal issues preventing tenants from maintaining these standards it is the responsibility of the allotment holder (or their representative) to inform the council as soon as possible so that this can be taken into account.

Tenancy agreements are reviewed.

Delegated authority given to Clerk in relation to rent setting for plots that are taken on that are in a poor condition.