

Outcomes of tenant consultation on rent and concessions 2018

Ceri Ashton, Allotments Manager



Background

Following discussions at the Allotment Advisory Group meeting in December 2017, all tenants were sent a consultation questionnaire regarding rents and concessions in January 2018. (They were also sent a monitoring form and a customer satisfaction survey. These will be discussed separately.)

The response rate for the questionnaire was very good: 22% . This presentation summarises the outcomes and makes recommendations arising from them

Q1. Are you in favour of small yearly increases in charges? E.g. in line with inflation (If rents stay the same, effectively the money available for managing and looking after Council allotments gets less, because of the effects of inflation)

Yes 70%

No 17%

Don't know 8%

Common comments:

- Not enough site improvements are seen/link increases to more improvements
- Tenants' income is not increasing, especially senior citizens
- Better than occasional large increases
- Ongoing increases may exclude those on low incomes
- The rent increase to being self-funding was too large; rents are already high
- An increase in line with inflation is reasonable/logical/necessary
- Consider different measures of inflation

Q2. Do you think decisions on any rent increases should be taken on a year by year basis? (as opposed to setting rents in advance for several years)

Yes **62%**

No **20%**

Don't know **12%**

Common comments:

- Set rent for 2/3/5/ a number of years ahead
- A small increase each year
- Link increase to inflation/wage increases/Council tax increases
- It would be good to know what future rents will be

Q3. It has been suggested that we should consider altering the way that we charge in order to make it fairer. Do you think we should alter the way that we charge?

Yes **30%**

No **32%**

Don't know **31%**

Common comments:

- 'Fair' means different things to different people
- Some don't use water but still pay for it/water cost is too high
- Price should vary between sites/plots depending on amenities/'quality'
- Keep it simple. The current system is fair

Q3 Comments Continued

- Current size category system is not fair.
Charge per square metre
- Means test/increase rent for those better off
- Avoid further means testing
- More information is needed
- Budget by site and publicise
- Meter water and charge in arrears
- Everyone should pay the same for water

Q4. Do you think we should introduce an admin charge?

Yes **32%**

No **55%**

Don't know **7%**

Common comments:

- Depends on the size
- If it's part of the rent, not in addition to
- If it leads to increased income
- Admin cost should be the same for all plots
- A one-off charge, not annual
- Don't make smaller plots more expensive; don't discourage people from having smaller plots

Q4 Comments continued

- Tenants of larger plots shouldn't have to subsidise tenants of smaller plots
- Only charge more for those who receive more input from officers
- Yes if it makes it fairer
- Link admin charge to the condition of the plot
- Keep it simple
- Charge by area
- Rent should reflect actual cost to the Council to administer

Q5. If yes, how large do you think it should be?

Under £10	16%
£10-£20	8%
Other (please specify)	4%
Don't know	10%
Not applicable	19%

Common comments:

- It should not result in overall increase in total
- £5/£10/£50/20%/50%
- **Should be relative to actual cost of administering a tenancy**
- It should not be over £10 for half a plot
- Just raise the rent instead
- It needs to be ring-fenced for allotments and transparent
- Admin charge should be higher than the variable charge

Q6. Do you have any other suggestions of how we might change the way that we charge?

Common comments:

- Make it more manageable for those on low incomes
- Charge for skips to be on site
- No admin charge, rent increases in line with inflation
- Allow direct debits for all payments
- Charge more for sites with more facilities
- Those working shouldn't subsidise others
- Generate income through chargeable additional services
- Charge a set-up fee and charge if inspection letters are needed
- Water rates are too high
- Give a discount for early payment
- Reduce rent

Q7. Are there any additional services we do not currently offer which you would wish to purchase from us if this option was available? (for example hedge cutting or removal of green waste)

Yes 42%

No 42%

Common comments

- Grass cutting
- Removing green waste and trees
- **Hedge cutting**/removal, shredding
- Chippings/compost/manure.
- A skip monthly/annually/twice a year
- Fences
- Strimming
- Brick laying
- A compulsory charge for cutting neglected hedges

Q7 comments continued

- Waste removal
- Provision of water butts
- Tool hire
- Help for those who are not new tenants
- Dismantling structures
- Maintenance of fences/doors
- Provision of toilets
- Raised beds, sheds
- It should be left to allotment societies
- Rotivation/digging of plots
- Provision of parking on site
- Using weedkiller
- More help with weed/pest control
- These services should be included in current rent

Q8. Do you think we should increase the charges for pigeon lofts?

Yes	24%
No	20%
Don't know	47%

Common comments:

- Pigeons should not be allowed on the allotments
- Pigeon lofts should not be subsidised
- There should be a small increase
- It should be a separate service
- Pigeon keeping should be supported as part of our heritage
- The cost should increase in line with inflation
- Increase the cost in line with increased cost of maintaining lofts
- Rent should reflect cost of provision of lofts/plus an admin charge
- Charge should increase if allotment rent is increasing
- Yes – pigeon keepers regularly take vehicles on sites and damage roads

Q9. Do you think we should introduce an application fee?

Yes **23%**

No **60%**

Don't know **10%**

Common comments:

- A small one
- Could be deducted from first year's rent
- Vary depending on popularity of site/only for sites with high demand
- Maybe for 2nd+ applications
- May put people off
- May help ensure applicants are serious
- Returnable deposit is a better idea
- Possibly a small one e.g. £5/£10
- Would the concession apply to it?

Q10. If we were to introduce an application fee, what do you think it should be?

£5	16%
£10	10%
£15	3%
Other	2%
Don't know	8%
Not applicable	31%

Common comments

- A small fee would help deter those who aren't serious
- £1, £5-£25, depending on site, £20, £50
- Half the rent, deduct from rent after 2 years, or 1st year's rent
- Waive for low incomes, one off not annual
- Charge 2 years' rent up front
- Reflect cost of process

Q11. Do you think we should introduce a deposit?

Yes	56%
No	27%
Don't know	10%

Common comments:

- If it is refundable
- It would cause extra administration
- If plots are in good condition
- Deduct it from the 2nd year's rent
- Try it and see; it could encourage people to cultivate
- It may deter some people from taking plots on
- Offer chargeable service to new tenants instead
- Instead, charge those who vacate after less than a year
- Introduce a security bond, to protect against plots being used to dump rubbish etc. Refundable at the end of the tenancy
- New tenants need to be made aware that plots can be strimmed
- Only on sites with waiting lists
- Do more to make new tenants aware how much work is involved

Q12. If we were to introduce a deposit, how much should it be?

£20	24%
£40	14%
£60	5%
Other (please specify)	11%
Don't know	16%

Common comments:

- Maybe less, so as not to deter those on a low income
- 25%/50% of the plot rent
- It should cover the cost of providing the service
- 1 year's rent without concession, refunded if plot is left in good condition
- £1/£10/£15/£0/£50/£80/£100/£200 vary according to plot size
- Offer a concession on it/means test
- Warn tenants before deposit is lost, take personal circumstances into account
- Determine by actual cost of establishing a new tenancy
- Base on the cost of re-instating a plot to a good state
- Waive for sites with vacancies?

Q13. Do you think offering concessions is the right thing to do in principle?

Yes	88%
No	3%
Don't know	2%

Common comments:

- I am eligible for a concession but have not always chosen to claim it/we should offer the option of paying in full
- Those with concessions are more likely to have time to spare
- The senior citizen concession may be too generous as they may be relatively well off
- The senior citizen concessions should be means tested/
- Pensions are not good
- Need to consider the impact of concessions on encouraging/discouraging different groups

Q13 Comments continued

- Without concessions it would be difficult for those on a low income to have an allotment. They create a level(ish) playing field
- It's difficult to judge who finds it difficult to pay
- Concessions for those in genuine hardship only. Not students
- Concessions are essential because rents are so high/vital for some people
- Rents are so low anyway, concessions are not necessary/the price should be the same for all
- Concessions get abused. Make it simpler. 25% only
- 'Green prescriptions' should be available
- Concessions may not be fair

Q14. How much do you think the concessions should be?

Most common responses:

Senior Citizens	25%
People in receipt of income related benefits	75%
People with disabilities	75%
Students eligible for full loans	25%
All full-time University students	25%
Other students (e.g. at college)	25%
People doing a PhD	25%
Eligible community groups	75%

Q15. Do you think we should return to defining senior citizens as people who can claim a state pension? (for new claimants; we would not remove the concession from people who have already been awarded it)

Yes **53%**

No **27%**

Don't know **11%**

Common comments:

- It should be fair. Keep it simple
- Many people have taken early retirement
- Many senior citizens are well off
- This would be in line with what is happening with bus travel
- Give consideration to those who have retired due to ill-health

Q15 Comments Continued

- Over 65s on lower incomes should be considered
- Pension eligibility is no indicator of wealth. Award concessions for low incomes only
- Base on employment status not age?
- Remove categories, base on individual circumstances
- People should be encouraged to have plots while they are younger
- Older tenants are assets to their sites
- Carer's allowance should give entitlement to a concession
- Give larger concessions on sites with no waiting list
- Base concessions on income
- Senior citizen concession encourages older people to be fit and active
- Students don't cultivate/move away
- Offer concessions for overgrown plots

General Comments

- Do more work on vacant plots
- More support for new tenants/better publicised
- Community groups don't need concessions; they can share the cost
- Information sheets for new tenants
- Give discounts for overgrown plots/rent free period
- Could allotment societies take on more responsibilities?
- Make direct debits more widely available
- Offer vacant plots to beekeepers
- Rents are fair and not excessive
- Rents are too high
- Tenants need a greater understanding of the budget and site improvements
- Get money from elsewhere
- Offer discounts to long-standing tenants

Recommendations arising from outcomes

- That the cabinet member considers a rent increase based on inflation for 2020/2021 (and considers a similar increase in future years, but decides annually), and a small increase in pigeon loft charges
- That we have a subsequent discussion about the concessions for students and senior citizens
- That we award a concession to those on Carer's Allowance (a means tested benefit)
- That we pilot offering chargeable additional services (start with hedge cutting?)

Recommendations arising from outcomes

- That the allotment office puts together some useful information sheets for new tenants (site specific?)
- That the support available to new tenants is explained in the offer letter
- Include more information about the budget and site improvements in the newsletter
- Consider the feasibility of an early payment discount (/late payment charge?)
- Have a subsequent more detailed discussion around introducing a deposit/bond/set-up charge