

# SALISBURY CITY COUNCIL

## Report

**Subject:** Flooding of allotments  
**Committee:** Full Council  
**Date:** 24 June 2024  
**Author:** Steve Bishop, Responsible Finance Officer (RFO)

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### 1. Report Summary

- 1.1. As one of its statutory duties the Council provides and manages several allotment sites around the city. This report considers whether a reduction to the 2024 allotment charge should be made for allotment plots affected by flooding.

### 2. Policy Considerations

- 2.1. The Council's Financial Regulations stipulate that the RFO is responsible for the collection of all sums due to the Council. Also, that the RFO is responsible for writing off any debts which he considers irrecoverable. The RFO must act under the policy direction of the Council.

### 3. Background Information:

- 3.1. Residents of the city are eligible to apply for an allotment plot and allotment tenants pay a modest annual charge for this service, depending upon their size of plot. For 2024 the charge is £9.20 per rod. The most numerous sized plots are 5 rods (£46) and 10 rods (£92). Allotments are in short supply and there are healthy waiting lists for each site.
- 3.2. Most of the Council allotment sites do not regularly suffer serious flooding, however a protracted flooding event has affected some sites and plots since November 2023. The Council has delayed sending annual invoices to the tenants of the most seriously affected site, Coldharbour Lane Allotment, whilst councillors consider the issue.
- 3.3. The Council has received three formal complaints from tenants on two other affected sites, Fisherton Farm Allotment (site A) and Fisherton Farm Allotment (site C).

### 4. Severity of the impact:

- 4.1. The Council manages 773 allotment plots over 13 sites. The majority of plots have not experienced flooding. All 40 plots on Coldharbour Lane Allotment site and several plots on Fisherton Farm A and C have been affected for an average of 6 months. Some plots remain flooded at the time of writing this report.
- 4.2. None of the Coldharbour Lane tenants have yet been invoiced for their 2024 annual rental (worth approximately £2,000 per annum). Unfortunately all tenants on the other sites - including any on Fisherton A and C that have experienced flooding - have been invoiced, resulting in three formal complaints being received.

- 4.3 The Council's standard allotment agreement clearly warns prospective tenants upfront that "some allotment sites in the city may flood during winter months". Therefore the Council might consider it reasonable that flooding is a risk which the tenant bears, in which case no reduction/waiver of rent need be considered. Alternatively, notwithstanding the wording of the agreement, the Council might consider that flood risk should be borne by the site owner and landlord, in which case the Council should consider providing a reduced annual rent (or waiver) as suitable compensation.
- 4.4 Pertinent to this report and Council decision is the cost of operating the sites, including invoicing and debt recovery; and, the additional cost of calculating/administering reductions. This financial context is considered in the following section.

## **5 Financial context:**

- 5.1 The annual revenue from allotment rents is approximately £37,300. Currently the Council does not cost its services (which officers are addressing) and therefore no ongoing comparison of income and expenditure can be made. However, the RFO has estimated that staff time for Environmental and Finance administration, water supply and associated costs total more than £40,000, which exceeds the income, demonstrating that the allotments are operated at an annual loss to the Council, effectively being subsidised by council tax payers.
- 5.2 It is the Senior Management Team's view that:
- each Council service should be encouraged to adopt a more businesslike focus
  - our income-generating services should aim to breakeven at the very least; and,
  - to generate a reasonable return for the broader benefit of council taxpayers wherever possible.
- 5.3 The healthy waiting lists and net loss position illustrate that supply and demand are not in balance. In addition to officers continually looking to make efficiency savings, the annual allotment rent could be significantly increased as part of the 2025/26 budget in order to bring allotments into a more financially sustainable position.
- 5.4 The allotment service already runs at an estimated annual loss and any reduction exercise will add to staff time cost as well as reduce income, increasing the operational loss which must be borne by the general taxpayer. The RFO considers that flood risk should be borne by the tenant - hence the wording in the agreement – and considers the annual rents are not irrecoverable, and therefore should not be written off.

## **6 Options to consider:**

- 6.1 The Council may wish to determine that flood risk should be borne by the tenants, in which case no reduction should be made and the RFO should issue all outstanding invoices (the RFO's preferred option); or,
- 6.2 The Council may wish to offer a full waiver for the whole of 2024 for all affected tenants at an approximate cost of £2,000; or,

6.3 The Council may wish to determine that flood risk should be borne by the site owner, in which case a reduction should be made to the annual invoice and the Council is asked to quantify that reduction e.g. 50% (this would be the highest net cost option and is the RFO's least preferred option).

## 7 **Recommendations:**

7.1 The Council is asked to determine what, if any, reduction in the annual allotment rent should be granted to affected tenants in recognition of the flooding to their plots since November 2023.

7.2 Councillors are asked to note the net financial position for allotments and the RFO's intention to recommend fee increases in the 2025/26 budget.

8 **Background Papers:** Three formal complaints received

## 9 **Implications:**

9.1 . **Financial:** As shown in this report

9.2 . **Legal:** Allotment tenancies are covered by legal agreements.

9.3 . **Personnel:** Nil in relation to this report

9.4 . **Environmental Impact:** Nil in relation to this report

9.5 . **Equalities Impact Statement:** Nil in relation to this report