

# Communities Scrutiny Commission

27 February 2024



## Public Forum

Details of public questions and public statements received for this meeting are enclosed.

**Please note:** The views and information contained within the public statements are those of the individuals concerned and not of the Council.



## Communities Scrutiny Commission 27 February 2024 Public Forum – Questions



**Public forum questions have been received as listed below (full details are set out on the subsequent pages):**

1. Joanna Mellors re: Agenda item 9 - Communities Scrutiny comments on Cabinet report on allotment rents and water charges
2. Dan Ackroyd re: Agenda item 9 - Communities Scrutiny comments on Cabinet report on allotment rents and water charges
3. Katy Ladbrook re: Agenda item 9 - Communities Scrutiny comments on Cabinet report on allotment rents and water charges



**1. QUESTIONS FROM JOANNA MELLORS**

**Re: Agenda item 9 – Communities Scrutiny comments on Cabinet report on allotment rents and water charges**

**Q.1a** The Allotment Service Briefing Paper includes a Bench Marking chart (Page 8); this includes a Note that has recently been added to their chart saying that 'Since carrying out the bench marking exercise, we are aware that some of the above authorities have further increased their rents by inflation....' Please could the Service provide an updated Bench Marking chart showing the actual figures applicable to the inflationary increases referred to in their Note?

**Officer response:**

**The information relating to other local authorities' allotment rent and charges is available via their websites.**

	2022	2023	2024
Bristol	£85	£85	£85 (£178) Increase will not be applied until April 2025)
Bath & North East Somerset	£173	£212	£227 (from Sept)
Plymouth	£178	£192	Not published
Nottingham	£172	£178	Not published
Brighton & Hove	£123	£126 + introduced £25 annual admin fee regardless of plot size	Not published
Birmingham	£114	£134	Not published
Sheffield	£126	£182	£192 (from April)

**The table shows rent for standard full plot (250sqm) and water charges added where applicable. Water service charge included at 30% of base rental unless otherwise stated by the authority. Where an authority charges by £ per m2 the mid-point dimension in the BCC plot size band is used to calculate the fee**

**Q.1b** Please could the Service provide the rationale for selecting Plymouth (clearly the 'outlier') rather than using the professionally conventional approach of ignoring outlier figures?

**Officer response:**

**Cities with a similar allotment portfolio were used as comparators. Plymouth is not considered an outlier as demonstrated in Q1.a, Bristol is proposing the equivalent of Plymouth rates prevailing in 2022. Plymouth, Bath and North East Somerset and Sheffield have now exceeded those rates.**

**Q1c** Please could the Service provide the other factors taken into account when adjusting the figures in the Bench Marking chart to achieve the proposed new rents?

**Officer response:**

**The rent increase does not meet the income required for the service to be fully funded, nor will it with the rent increase.**

**The rent increase considered inflation since last rent increase (2018), £55k Council budget saving from 2022 onwards, increase in repair and maintenance costs and additional allotment officer.**

**All additional services are on top of the basic rent for the land, so that tenants who enjoy additional services and facilities e.g. water etc are not subsidised by tenants who do not have access to these facilities.**

**Q.2** Please could the Service provide the data from the responses to the Allotment Consultation Survey launched on 11/12/23 specifically with regard to the Rent Increases?

**Officer response:**

**Data from the responses to the Allotment Consultation Survey has been included in the EQIA and the Consultation Feedback which will be released with the Cabinet report for allotment rents and water charges.**

**Q.3** Equalities Impact Assessment

Why has an EIA looking at the proposed increases still not been made available? Why was it not carried out at the time the increases were being developed?

**Officer response:**

**2022 EQIA is available, however 25% increase in rent only dealt with the Council Budget, it did not take into account inflation or customer requirements, so is insufficient to meet current demands on the service.**

**An EQIA has been produced for the Allotment Rents and Water Charges report which will be going to Cabinet on March 5<sup>th</sup> 2024, which takes into account the consultation feedback, provision of the expansion of the low income discount to include all tenants in receipt of Universal Credit and Pension Credit, and increase methods of payment available to include Direct Debit quarterly and monthly options.**

**Q.4** The Allotment Briefing for the Communities Scrutiny Commission meeting of 27/2/24 (Page 4) looks at the Budget figures for Buildings and Infrastructure. In particular, it states:

**'Buildings & Infrastructure – annualised cyclical replacement/maintenance over 15yrs £233.196'**

Please supply details of the three highest cost projects (location, outline of proposed works, estimated costs)?

**Officer response:**

**We have location and quantum data for the infrastructure on allotment sites. We have obtained projected costs derived from recent works and assessments annualising the costs over a 15 year period. Due to lack of funds, we have not been able prioritise works, as the current budget only allows us to carry out critical emergency work within the budget available and does not provide for any cyclical maintenance or preventative repairs. Even with the proposed rent increases this will mean we will need to have a programme of works developed and prioritised to address the backlog of maintenance.**

## 2. QUESTIONS FROM DAN ACKROYD

### Re: Agenda item 9 – Communities Scrutiny comments on Cabinet report on allotment rents and water charges

**Q.1** On page 4 of the "Allotment Briefing" there is a breakdown of the annual cost required to manage and maintain the allotment which includes:

"Buildings & Infrastructure - annualised cyclical replacement/maintenance over 15yrs £233,196"

What building and/or infrastructure is costing the equivalent of £3.5 million pounds every fifteen years?

#### **Officer response:**

**The building and/or infrastructure includes water, walls, fencing and hauling ways across over 100 allotment sites in Bristol.**

**We have obtained projected costs derived from recent works and assessments annualising the costs over a 15 year period. Due to lack of funds, we have not been able to prioritise works, as the current budget only allows us to carry out critical emergency work within the budget available and does not provide for any cyclical maintenance or preventative repairs. Even with the proposed rent increases this will mean we will need to have a programme of works developed and prioritised to address the backlog of maintenance.**

**Q.2** Looking at the Allotment Financial accounts for the years back to 2017, it seems the highest previous amount for "Buildings and infrastructure" spending was £67,464 in 2017-18, with an average of spend of £44,433 over the five years 2017 to 2022.

Why has this item increased to £301K for 2024-25?

#### **Officer response:**

**Due to the austerity measures introduced since 2010, the annual budget for allotments has reduced significantly, which has resulted in less being spent on buildings and infrastructure. The rent uplift will allow us to prioritise additional funding to allow us to address the backlog of maintenance to buildings and infrastructure.**

**Q.3** On page 3 of the "Allotment Briefing" there is the text "Full Council decision on 2nd March 2022 agreed to an annual revenue budget saving of £55K for allotments".

I can't see any savings (also known as cuts) being made to the service. Should I interpret the text as saying that the Allotments service is now required to make a profit of £55K a year?

#### **Officer response:**

**Full Council agreed on 2 March 2022 an annual revenue budget saving of £55K, which was to be applied to allotment fee income from the beginning of April 2023. The implementation of this was delayed to allow for the Parks and Green Spaces and Allotment Strategy to be developed. In the absence of a rise in allotment fees, the Parks Service has been delivering this saving as an interim measure, but the saving target is still for the allotment service to deliver. The increase in rents and delivery of this saving will not place the service in a position where it is making a profit.**

**3. QUESTIONS FROM KATY LADBROOK**

**Re: Agenda item 9 – Communities Scrutiny comments on Cabinet report on allotment rents and water charges**

Dear Cllr Fodor and CSC,

I seek advice from the CSC on a series of errors with the consultation process for the allotment strategy. I have raised these with the Allotment Office, Democratic Services, and with my own local Councillors. You will see that only two enquiries have received explanation. I understand that the report from the consultation will proceed to Cabinet for decision on 5th March and I am very concerned that these errors amounting to potential maladministration are being ignored.

I believe the consultation process is flawed and any decisions based on results of the consultation are void. Please could you give scrutiny to these concerns?

With best wishes,  
Katy Ladbrook

**Note - details of the enquires referred to above as supplied by the questioner are set out below:**

Complaint	Response
The consultation period opened on 11 <sup>th</sup> December 2023 but was not communicated to an estimated half of Bristol Allotment Tenants until 17 <sup>th</sup> January 2024.	
The initial consultation period (closing 22 <sup>nd</sup> January 2024) was too short and did not allow for public holidays and the Christmas and New Year period.	
The extended consultation period (closing 31 <sup>st</sup> January) was closed earlier than advertised, due to a technical error, preventing participation at a peak time for engagement.	
The supporting documents to the survey did not include financial accounts or explanations of expenditure of proposed extra funds raised through increased rents. An independent financial analysis of the proposed rents found it to be illogical and amounting to increases of nearly 500% for some bandings. Financial accounts for the last three years have been repeatedly requested, including by timely FOI request, but still to date have not been provided.	
The supporting documents to the survey did not include an Environmental Impact Assessment of the proposed rules. There	

<p>appears to have been no consideration for interaction with local and national ecology policies or engagement in the consultation with members of the teams which deliver ecology strategy.</p>	
<p>The supporting documents to the survey did not include the 2022 Equalities Impact Assessment which included key advice to avoid potential negative impacts of the proposed rules and rent increase. A replacement EqIA is due on 26/02/2024, and therefore too late to be considered as part of the consultation.</p>	
<p>The version control section of the <u>Allotment Rules book (2023)</u> (provided as supporting document to the survey) was blank, so it was assumed that proposed changes to the rules are those detailed in <u>Schedule B – Allotments Transitional Arrangements</u>. This was unclear and inaccessible.</p>	<p>The proposed Allotment Rules shared in the consultation was the first version of this document. If the Rules were agreed and adopted, any future amendments made to the Rules would then be added to the version control.</p>
<p>The description of the proposed new rules in the survey did not match the much more significant new rules described in the <u>Transitional Arrangements</u>. The survey was not set up to adequately capture feedback.</p>	<p>The Transitional Arrangements provided information on the grace period that would be offered to existing tenants to allow sufficient time to adapt to the new terms and conditions. This was in recognition that that there may be legacies that existed prior to the proposed Tenancy Agreement and Allotment Rules. The survey contained a free text comment section to enable additional feedback to be given on any of the proposed changes to allotments.</p>
<p>A workshop (focus group?) was arranged to capture more feedback, but advice on how to participate was not made available, its remit was not defined, and there was no attempt at inclusive participation design. The workshop was cancelled at short notice with no alternative provision made.</p>	
<p>No explanation has been made for how the consultation, evaluation or review processes will engage with hard-to-reach sections of the community, stake holders and forums representing groups who will be most vulnerable to negative impacts of the proposal.</p>	

<p>There appears to have been no consideration for interaction with local and national equality and inclusion policies or engagement in the consultation with members of the teams which deliver such strategy.</p>	
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--

**Officer response:**

Responses added in **bold** text in box below:

Complaint	Response
<p>The consultation period opened on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2023 but was not communicated to an estimated half of Bristol Allotment Tenants until 17<sup>th</sup> January 2024.</p>	<p><b>Information on the consultation and how to submit feedback was shared directly with:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>3,500 tenants via email,</b></li> <li>• <b>450 letters sent to tenants without emails,</b></li> <li>• <b>8,000 prospective tenants on the waiting list via email,</b></li> <li>• <b>5 allotment associations provided with information to share with their tenants.</b></li> <li>• <b>Other Stakeholders e.g Bristol Food Producers</b></li> <li>• <b>Councillors</b></li> </ul> <p><b>Details of the consultation was promoted on the BCC allotment webpage and alongside the Parks and Green Spaces Strategy, and posters were displayed in allotment sites across the city.</b></p> <p><b>The consultation could be completed online, while paper copies or alternative formats could be requested via email or telephone.</b></p>
<p>The initial consultation period (closing 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2024) was too short and did not allow for public holidays and the Christmas and New Year period.</p>	<p><b>Consultation on the proposed changes to the rent, tenancy agreement and rules took place between 11 December 2023 – 22 January 2024, with a further extension agreed until 31 January 2024, to allow more time for people to take part.</b></p>



<p>The extended consultation period (closing 31<sup>st</sup> January) was closed earlier than advertised, due to a technical error, preventing participation at a peak time for engagement.</p>	<p><b>As soon as we were made aware that the online survey had closed due to a technical error it was rectified and reopened</b></p>
<p>The supporting documents to the survey did not include financial accounts or explanations of expenditure of proposed extra funds raised through increased rents. An independent financial analysis of the proposed rents found it to be illogical and amounting to increases of nearly 500% for some bandings. Financial accounts for the last three years have been repeatedly requested, including by timely FOI request, but still to date have not been provided.</p>	<p><b>Financial information covering 2017- 2022 has been shared. The request for financial accounts for income and expenditure from 2022 have not yet been shared and officers are working to provide the information requested.</b></p>
<p>The supporting documents to the survey did not include an Environmental Impact Assessment of the proposed rules. There appears to have been no consideration for interaction with local and national ecology policies or engagement in the consultation with members of the teams which deliver ecology strategy.</p>	<p><b>An EQIA has been produced for the Allotment Rents and Water Charges report which will be going to Cabinet on March 5<sup>th</sup> 2024, which takes into account the consultation feedback, provision of the expansion of the low income discount to include all tenants in receipt of Universal Credit and Pension Credit, and increase methods of payment available to include Direct Debit quarterly and monthly options.</b></p>
<p>The supporting documents to the survey did not include the 2022 Equalities Impact Assessment which included key advice to avoid potential negative impacts of the proposed rules and rent increase. A replacement EqIA is due on 26/02/2024, and therefore too late to be considered as part of the consultation.</p>	<p><b>An EQIA has been produced for the Allotment Rents and Water Charges report which will be going to Cabinet in March 5<sup>th</sup> 2024, which takes into account the consultation feedback, provision of the expansion of the low income discount to include all tenants in receipt of Universal Credit and Pension Credit, and increase methods of payment available to include Direct Debit quarterly and monthly options.</b></p>
<p>The version control section of the <u>Allotment Rules book (2023)</u> (provided as supporting document to the survey) was blank, so it was assumed that proposed changes to the rules are those detailed in <u>Schedule B – Allotments Transitional Arrangements</u>. This was unclear and inaccessible.</p>	<p>The proposed Allotment Rules shared in the consultation was the first version of this document. If the Rules were agreed and adopted, any future amendments made to the Rules would then be added to the version control.</p> <p>The introduction of new allotment rule has been delayed and this was communicated through the letter sent out by Cllr King.</p>
<p>The description of the proposed new rules in the survey did not match the much more</p>	<p>The Transitional Arrangements provided information on the grace period that would be</p>

<p>significant new rules described in the <u>Transitional Arrangements</u>. The survey was not set up to adequately capture feedback.</p>	<p>offered to existing tenants to allow sufficient time to adapt to the new terms and conditions. This was in recognition that there may be legacies that existed prior to the proposed Tenancy Agreement and Allotment Rules. The survey contained a free text comment section to enable additional feedback to be given on any of the proposed changes to allotments.</p> <p>The introduction of new allotment rule has been delayed and this was communicated through the letter sent out by Cllr King.</p>
<p>A workshop (focus group?) was arranged to capture more feedback, but advice on how to participate was not made available, its remit was not defined, and there was no attempt at inclusive participation design. The workshop was cancelled at short notice with no alternative provision made.</p>	<p><b>An explanation was provided in a letter from Councillor King to all who expressed an interest in participating in the workshop and to all tenants.</b></p> <p><b>The letter stated letter ‘The third and final theme is that there are significant concerns and objections to the proposed tenancy rule changes, and administrative fees and charges. I share some of the disappointment expressed about the process and understand and agree with much of the feedback received.</b></p> <p><b>In response to this feedback, and to allow for more meaningful engagement, I have agreed with the Mayor and the parks service that the proposed changes to tenancy rules, fees and charges will not be taken forward in their current form. A key aim of the proposed Parks and Green Spaces Strategy is for the council to work differently with communities to ensure an inclusive and accessible parks service, so I am taking this opportunity to prove our commitment to this principle.</b></p> <p><b>We are also therefore postponing the workshop with allotment tenants and stakeholders that had been organised for Monday 5th February. I apologise for any inconvenience caused to those who were planning to attend. I have asked the service to prepare a more collaborative process to discuss and redesign the tenancy agreement with representative stakeholders. This will allow the necessary time to make the</b></p>

	<p><b>engagement meaningful and help to build a trusting and constructive working relationship.'</b></p>
<p>No explanation has been made for how the consultation, evaluation or review processes will engage with hard-to-reach sections of the community, stake holders and forums representing groups who will be most vulnerable to negative impacts of the proposal. There appears to have been no consideration for interaction with local and national equality and inclusion policies or engagement in the consultation with members of the teams which deliver such strategy.</p>	<p><b>Consultation Response rate</b>  <b>The consultation received 2,925 responses, of these 2060 (70.64%) from current allotment tenants, 228 (7.82%) people on waiting list, 141 (4.84%) allotment association tenants, 86 (2.95%) food collective or community growing group member, 219 (7.51%) residents of Bristol interested in food growing, 7 (0.24%) Councillors, 2 (0.07%) large scale food producers, 173 (5.93%) 'Other'. 9 respondents skipped this question.</b></p> <p><b>Further details will be contained within the Consultation Feedback report which will be included the Allotment Rents and Water Charge Cabinet paper.</b></p>

# Communities Scrutiny Commission

## 27 February 2024

### Public Forum – Statements



**Public forum statements have been received as listed below (full details are set out on the subsequent pages):**

1. Suzanne Audrey: Update on Bristol City Council's Ecological Emergency Action Plan (agenda item 7)
2. Dan Ackroyd: Update on Bristol City Council's Ecological Emergency Action Plan (agenda item 7)
3. Christopher Faulkner Gibson: Allotment rents (agenda item 9)
4. Ruth Hecht: Allotment rents (agenda item 9)
5. Steve Sayers: Saving community spaces (agenda item 10)

**Please note:** The views and information contained within these public statements are those of the individuals concerned and not of the Council.





## STATEMENT 1

### Statement to Communities Scrutiny Commission, Suzanne Audrey

#### Re: Update on Bristol City Council's Ecological Emergency Action Plan

The report for this item on the agenda states: Overall good progress has been made with delivery of the Council's Ecological Emergency Strategy.

However, it makes no reference to the fact that Avon Wildlife Trust, a key partner, seems to have had no alternative but to publicly criticise the actions of Bristol City Council in relation to ecology on more than one occasion. The latest shocking incident took place at Yew Tree Farm Site of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI) where dormice have been recorded harm. This was sufficiently shocking to attract press attention:

['Wanton vindictive destruction' at Yew Tree Farm \(bristol247.com\)](#)

[Fury at cutting of ancient hedge near Yew Tree Farm as Wildlife Trust calls for dormice protection - Bristol Live \(bristolpost.co.uk\)](#)

Members of the public alerted the relevant Bristol City Council cabinet members, Cllr Marley



Bennett and Cllr Ellie King, as well as relevant officers and have not received any response. It is my understanding that the police were alerted, attended the scene and the damaging work was stopped. However, the picture shows some of the considerable harm done.

I hope the Communities Scrutiny Commission looks into this and makes strong representations to the relevant cabinet members and senior officers. It is not good enough to declare an ecological emergency and put out reports

claiming 'good progress' if such damaging activities are unchallenged.

## **STATEMENT 2 – DAN ACKROYD**

I'm sure the officers are doing good work on the Ecological Emergency Action Plan but Bristol City Council looks ridiculous.

On February the 20th, the Cabinet member for Public Health and Communities said that someone was spreading "fear and misinformation" about whether work was about to damage the land at Yew Tree Farm.

Two days later the flails arrived. And they appear to have churned up a significant chunk of land.

How do you expect people to take protecting the environment seriously, when BCC only does so when it's convenient?

How do you expect people to not be angry when politicians will boast about signing declarations and will appear for photo ops, but then, when the council wants to develop a Site of Nature Conservation Interest, the rules are bent and surveys of endangered wildlife are 'skipped', so that development can go ahead?

### STATEMENT 3 – CHRISTOPHER FAULKNER GIBSON

Chair,

Whilst we all appreciate the need for an increase in allotment rents, I believe the current proposals are too much, too quickly and that Bristol's current banding system is unfair.

The current average allotment rent amongst the Core Cities is 33p/m<sup>2</sup> for a standard (250 m<sup>2</sup>) plot. The proposed increase would see Bristol's equivalent rent rise to 71p/m<sup>2</sup>.

The proposed increases are illogical, punitive, and unjustifiable: the rate of increase is inconsistent across all bands and new bands are being created without any rationale at the upper end, with even higher percentage increases.

Given that most of Bristol's allotments fall within areas defined by the City Council as suffering food insecurity and that for most of us on low incomes growing our own is an important factor in affording fresh, healthy food, the current proposals are disproportionately unfair. The offer of increased discounts for those in receipt of either Universal Credit or Pension Credit does nothing for the great bulk of us who fall outside the eligibility for these benefits but who are nevertheless struggling with the cost-of-living crisis.

Most other local authorities seem to charge by the square metre which is a fairer system. For example, under the Bristol banding system the rent for a plot of 75sq metres is the same as for a plot of 149sq metres, almost double the size.

I would like to see the current proposals put on hold pending a more thorough review of the whole charging regime and would suggest:

- Charging by the square metre, instead of vague and seemingly arbitrary bands as this would allow a more balanced, fairer system,
- The level of increase in the current proposals should be more in line with the level of inflation over the years since 2018 (which was, inexplicably, the last years rents rose),
- Any large increases should be phased over three years, not imposed all at once,
- And thereafter, there should be an annual increase, based on inflation (for example, based on the Bank of England average over the six months prior to invoice each September),
- The option for monthly Direct Debit payments is welcomed. Not only is it easier to cope when costs are spread but an annual increase can then be applied without fuss.

We are pleased that the proposed rule and tenancy changes have been withdrawn pending further consideration. The whole consultation exercise has been very poorly handled with insufficient information provided, making it difficult for any of us to make a properly informed comment – the benchmarking information supplied to your Committee is markedly different to that we have obtained through Freedom of Information requests (we should not have had to resort to FoI's for this). *The comparable rents for the other local authorities are far higher in your briefing pack than the document I was provided in response to my FoI*



*request* – this makes the proposed Bristol increases look more reasonable but by not sharing this information the consultation exercise is shown to be even more flawed.

The budget information available is unclear and contains items such as a sudden £223k increase in expenditure that has simply not been explained in the consultation, in contradiction to the Gunning principles: if we are not properly informed, we are not properly consulted.

We are also confused as to why the benchmarking was not done using the Core Cities, as is usual when comparisons are needed. The choice of local authorities seems weighted to make the proposed increases seem more reasonable.

I urge this Committee to recommend that the clumsy, flawed, unexplained and unjustifiable rent rises are also withdrawn for further consideration and amendment. Bristol should have an allotment charging regime that is fair, fit for purpose and ensures that income keeps pace with inflation: the current proposals fails on all counts.

With thanks

Christopher Faulkner Gibson

## STATEMENT 4

### To members of the Communities Scrutiny Commission – allotment rent increases

I am a tenant at Dubbers Lane allotment site, Eastville. I was a Rep for several years, and I co-wrote the Handbook for Allotment Reps and Handbook for Allotment Tenants for Bristol City Council in 2020 and 2023. My statement is about the rent increases which will be presented to Cabinet on 5<sup>th</sup> March.

To be clear, I fully support rent increases because they haven't gone up since 2018, and I recognise the Allotment team is under-staffed and under resourced. However, the proposed rent increases are illogical and unfair, and are based on a budget which is incongruous.

#### **The Budget**

These comments are based on the budget provided in your papers (note that *no* budget for 25/26 has been made publically available for the consultation prior to this). I have scrutinised hundreds of budgets which forecast spend over my 40 year career working in the Public Sector and found it virtually impossible to give them any credibility without seeing previous accounts which show what has *actually* been spent in years prior to the forecast.

Through an FOI request and other intelligence gathering, I have the budgets of the allotments service from 2017-2022. Which shows the following income and expenditure:

Allotment service budgets 2017-2022						
Year	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	Average
Income	217,739	256,793	242,071	292,371	275,457	<b>£256, 886</b>
Expenditure	233,192	256,508	324,199	318,580	280,869	<b>£282,670</b>
Balance	-15,453	285	-82,128	-26,209	-5,412	<b>-25,784</b>

To summarise, the average spend for allotments over 5 years 2017-2022 has been: income £257k, expenditure £283k, and a deficit of £26k. **How, therefore, can a budget be presented which shows an expenditure of £688k which is nearly 2.5 times greater than expenditure in previous years, and a deficit of £299k which is nearly 12 times greater than in previous years?**

Four items appear in the 25/26 budget which do not appear in previous budgets:

1. *Buildings and infrastructure – annualised cyclical replacement/maintenance over 15 years - £233,196*
2. *Statutory Compliance Checks - £23,040*
3. *Waste clearance and pest control - £31k*
4. *Corporate Income Target - £55k*

These three items come to £342k. What is the explanation for these figures?

- How will £233k be spent *in a single year* on buildings and infrastructure? Where is the breakdown of this very precise figure? What does it mean that it's part of a 15 year annualised cycle? If this figure is used to justify a rent increase, why do allotment tenants have to pay to make up for the fact that there has been an under-investment in allotment sites for years?

- What are ‘Statutory Compliance Checks’? Who carries these out? Why is a separate budget line needed for them if they are carried out by Allotments staff?
- Why is ‘Waste clearance and pest control’ an item? We have consistently been told by the Allotments Team that if we want to order a skip or call pest control, we have to pay for it ourselves. Does this item mean that from now on the Council will organise these things? That would be very positive.
- The Corporate Income Target of £55k appears to be spurious – it’s a sum which *wasn’t* in the budget for 22/23, and doesn’t have any actual item of expenditure attached to it. Is it to add to the Parks and Green Spaces budget as a whole? Why should allotment tenants subsidise the City’s parks and green spaces which are free to use by all citizens?
- There are two different income figures for the *projected* budget in the published information: £286k based on 22/23 income and £389k based on the rent increases. This implies that the rent increases will generate an additional £103k – where are the details of how this figure was arrived at?

### ***Proposed rent increases***

A detailed scrutiny of the proposed rent increases shows that Tenants are being treated completely differently across the City – there appears to be no consistent approach to rent rises *at all* and they are very different from inflationary increases, for example:

- Rents for tenants on sites with water will increase by anything from **66% to 220%** (bizarrely the percentage increases are not based on plot size: from smallest to largest plots the % increases are: 140%, 78%, 123%, 109%, 66%, 88%, 136%, 220% - how on earth was this arrived at?)
- Rents for people on benefits on a site *without* water will increase by anything from **113% to 492%** (how can it be justified that people with fewer facilities pay a much larger increase?)
- Overall the **lowest rent rise is 7% and the highest is 492%** (how can this be fair?)
- Tenants with plots *on the same site* will pay totally different percentage increases depending on the size of their plot, with two new size bands being introduced which means some people’s rent will **sextuple from £82.50 to £528** (the same rent will **triple if you’re on benefit rising from £82.50 to £264**)
- Currently a tenant on a large plot is paying £165; the Council’s proposed new rent is £528; an inflationary increase would be £225 – **a difference of over £300 a year between the Council’s proposed new rent and an inflationary rise**
- Currently a tenant on benefits on a medium sized plot is paying £35; the Council’s proposed new rent is £78; an inflationary increase would be to £48 – **a difference of £30 a year between the Council’s proposed new rent and an inflationary rise**

### ***Conclusion***

I have presented you with very detailed figures. This is because the devil *is* in the detail. I feel it’s extremely important that members of the Community Scrutiny Commission realise that there are far more questions to be asked of officers and Cllr. King about the proposed budget for 25/26 and the proposed rent increases.

There are several other ways in which rents could be increased which would be much fairer, and which would still generate additional income for the service. For example:

- Charge people in line with Council Tax bands so that those in more deprived areas of the City pay less, and in more affluent areas pay more
- Make a charge *per meter* for sites with and without water, and for people who do and don't receive benefits, so that the amount people pay is truly aligned with the size of their plot
- Have two sets of rents which rise in logical steps with the existing size bands, one for people who receive benefits and one for people who don't, and a single standard additional charge for water on site
- Increase rents in line with inflation every year. Write this into the Tenancy Agreement.

**Ruth Hecht**

**23 February 2024**

Submission to Communities Scrutiny Commission 27 Feb 2024 by Steve Sayers on behalf of community anchor organisations.

## **Roots of Resilience: Saving Community Spaces Statement 5**

Our community, civic, and cultural infrastructure has played an indispensable role in supporting our communities for decades and has proven its worth through the pandemic and cost of living crises. However, the process underpinning decisions on disposal of council-owned buildings hugely undervalues the impact and role.

Without changes to these, the future of these spaces will always be at risk.

**We have written a manifesto which calls on Bristol City Council to take urgent and transformative action to protect and enhance our shared spaces for the benefit of our communities.**

**We invite you to meet with us over coming weeks to talk through our manifesto in full.**

**Together, let's ensure our community spaces remain vibrant, inclusive, and resilient for generations to come.**

### **OUR ASKS**

Our short term asks relate to this decision-making process. We ask that the Council:

- Review the Community Asset Transfer (CAT) process, to enable more community organisations to consider this route.
- Adopt a target and strategy for increasing the number of community owned assets, in line with the One City Plan.
- Delegate leadership for community assets to a member of cabinet or committee, recognizing the sector's role across council departments.
- Delegate authority to officer level to award CAT leases, for 95 years, when these are up for renewal.
- Include representation from Neighbourhoods and Committees in the CAT decision-making committees.

Along with partner organisations representing the community sector nationwide, we are calling on the Council to:

- Create a framework for protection and disposal of council owned assets, including creating a new 'community' asset class which prioritises preservation of community spaces.
- Implement a fair rent structure which recognises the social and investment benefits of community-owned assets.
- Develop a capital investment strategy for organisations with CAT leases.

### **BRISTOL AT THE FOREFRONT**

Councils nationwide are facing the same questions with regards to the future of community and social infrastructure. In Bristol we have an opportunity to set a new precedent for the rest of the country on this national issue.

The One City Plan already recognises the positive impact of sustainable community anchor organisations and places an emphasis on the importance of communities having a role in managing their own spaces. By incorporating the asks set out in our manifesto, Bristol's councillors can demonstrate a model of positive cooperation and community ownership and management which works for all our communities.

For more information on our manifesto and how you can support, please contact Steve Sayers, CEO Windmill Hill City Farm: [steve.sayers@windmillhillcityfarm.org.uk](mailto:steve.sayers@windmillhillcityfarm.org.uk)

**ENDS**