Introduction:
BDAC Executive members have for some time been receiving complaints about the service received from Water Plus. Water Plus is the chosen supplier for all Birmingham City Council. Water charges form part of the Devolved Budget (see Allotment Management Handbook Section 4.5). In order to try and ascertain the situation across the 117 sites the executive shared a questionnaire with site secretaries at the beginning of 2022. The comments that follow result from the returns received.

Feedback:

- Thirty-five sites replied to the questionnaire.
- All have a water supply.
- Two sites do not have a water meter.
- One site in Sutton Coldfield actually has two meters and is supplied by South Staffs in addition to Water Plus.
- Thirty four sites have toilets.
- The majority of sites have 2 toilets. (Ladies & Gents)
- Nineteen of the sites have main sewage.
- Four sites have at least one chemical toilet and three sites have a compostable toilet.
- Eleven sites have a cess pit.
- Seven sites reported that they were charged Agricultural rates.
- Eight sites reported that they were charged Commercial rates.
- Sixteen sites reported they did not know what rate they were charged at.
- Eight sites are being charged VAT (1)
- Nineteen sites are not charged VAT
- The remaining sites were unable to answer the question.
- Seven sites have had sewage added to their bills and some did not know. (2)
- Twenty-three sites receive regular bills.
- Fourteen sites receive their bills direct from Water Plus and some have registered to receive the bills on-line.
- Eighteen sites receive bills from the Allotment Officer. (Some of these are duplicates of the ones from Water Plus)

(1) At some sites VAT was reclaimed for one year but the figure reappeared on later bills
(2) Sewage charges: One site reports they have been attempting to have the cost removed for 2 years. Another site that charges were applied because the treasurer failed to date his signature. This site has installed a meter on the toilet block specially to record the amount of water used.

Comments:
The returns show only some of the problems Treasurers and Secretaries face when dealing with Water Plus. The majority of these volunteers have neither the time nor the knowledge base to deal with a large enterprise such as Water Plus.

The problems are compounded by

1. Failure of the Council to supply a breakdown of the devolved budget to all sites.
2. Failure of Water Plus to include details of rates and charges.

BDAC Executive recognise that there may be problems with some sites that may not fit the

usual model but it would seem reasonable to expect that all allotment sites were charged at the same rate and that the officers had access to meter readings they could check. However, they do NOT consider that individual site officers should be the ones sorting out the problems.

The responsibility of ensuring that the management of the Water Billing system is that of the Council and it is not appropriate to delegate this to sites. The sites should be expected to run within the budget constraints and take reasonable steps to enforce water usage rules, however, it should not be negotiating with the Council's chosen supplier.

Water usage like a number of other issues is based on historical data that fails to take account of current usage of sites. One site reports having to turn water off at the end of August as they have big plots and the allowance is inadequate.

The Council needs to be open and transparent when dealing with sites.

The Council should ensure that ALL allotments are charged at Agricultural rates.
Sewage charges should NOT be based on the total amount of water used.
VAT should NOT be added.

ALL sites should receive a breakdown of the Devolved budget. The increase in Devolved Budget according to inflation rather than real charges is not appropriate at this time.