

Birmingham and District Allotments Confederation (BDAC) Statement on the authority's S114 notices and the proposed 7 point recovery plan put forward the city council's chief executive officer, Deborah Cadman.

3rd October 2023

The BDAC acts for plotholders on over 100 allotment sites in Birmingham – the biggest portfolio of allotment sites in the country – and provides support on a voluntary basis to the committees which are also volunteer-run and which manage these sites on behalf of Birmingham City Council, the landowner. Together these 600 hectares of land (approx.) represent a vital part of Birmingham's green spaces for all its citizens. Their contribution to reducing environmental degradation can't be overstated. They are also places to escape the noise and stress of urban life for thousands of people, providing gardening opportunities and producing significant amounts of locally sourced fruit and vegetables.

The BDAC has specific responses to five of the suggestions in the financial recovery plan put forward by BCC Chief Executive Deborah Cadman last week:

1. Reduce spending. It's worth pointing out that the Allotments Department already operates a balanced budget with allotment rents paid by tenants covering the costs of the Council's spending on managing sites (Allotment Dept staff costs, Parks Dept fees for grounds maintenance, inspection charges etc). So unless this plan is going to suggest that tenants subsidise other Council services, we can't see how the Allotments Service can do anything on this aspect of the plan.

2. Restructure

Along with 'leaner corporate services' the plan also covers "more effective partnerships with other public, private and community sector organisations" and the possibility of "partners who are offering to take on some of the responsibility to deliver services. In some cases, some of the community groups that we are working with are better placed to deliver some of the services that we are delivering at the moment" (quote from Chief Exec Deborah Cadman). She also said "We also need to be clear about the services that are considered statutory and the spending which is considered essential. We're looking at the spending controls and applying a framework."

In case people are not aware, allotment sites are part of statutory provision and therefore are subject to a complicated legal process if local councils wish to dispose of them by getting allotment land redesignated as development land. The Secretary of State has to agree this and the process can take years – so selling off sites would not be a quick way of finding money to pay off debts.

3. Asset review

Allotment sites are Council-owned assets, every bit as valuable as their buildings, and as Councils have a statutory obligation to provide allotment plots (20 plots per thousand households is the National Allotment Society recommendation which is followed nationally). BCC would have to lease land back to meet that provision even if they were able to sell off

sites. The cost of leasing back the amount of land necessary to fulfill the Council's statutory duty would be prohibitive.

Interestingly, current under-provision of plots is likely to be around 20% less than it should be based on the 2011 census figures for the City, and since then the population has risen. The BDAC would resist any plan which included selling-off of sites or redesignation of sites for development - we have already lost enough sites and parts of sites since World War 2. Ms Cadman also said "We're spending just as much time looking at those assets which this organisation needs to keep. And the reason why they need to keep them is because they make a direct impact on our ability to grow the economy of this city. There will be strategic decisions to be made when we approach the government so we don't fall into the trap of simply selling everything without doing the necessary assessment about the real value of those assets."

We agree that BCC needs to look at the real value of allotment assets, including how food production and other activities on sites contribute to growing the City's economy and keeping its population healthy.

4. Review of council-controlled companies and trading services

The BDAC supports this review, because quite a lot of tenants' rent money is being spent on council-controlled companies and trading services which experience tells us could be done more efficiently and effectively at lower cost.

5. Income review - including Council Tax

Allotment rentals have just risen in line with inflation and are due to rise again next October. Plot rents are much higher than in many other parts of the country, so again the BDAC would resist plans to increase them further, especially as so much of the site management is by volunteers – so how can rent increases be justified?

The BDAC would be very happy to talk with BCC councillors and officers about a way forward for allotments in the City as we think the experience of managing these sites gained by hundreds of volunteers will be an essential part of the plan for dealing with the current crisis.