

Item No.	Classification: Open	Date: 13/02/2024	Meeting Name: Environment and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission
Report title:		Community Gardening Service Update 2023/24	
Wards affected:		All	
Cabinet Member:		Councillor Catherine Rose Cabinet Member for Leisure, Parks, Streets and Clean Air	

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Scrutiny Committee notes the content of this report.

BACKGROUND

2. The Community Gardening service was created in June 2020 with the establishment of 2 fixed-term part-time Community Gardening Coordinator (CGC) posts with the mission to:
 - Be the main point of contact within the council for community gardening and food growing enquiries
 - Increase opportunities for residents to access community gardening
 - Support a Southwark community gardening network
 - Champion community gardening across the council
3. Following the creation of this service, in April 2021, the council launched the Allotment Expansion Guarantee (AEG) under the aegis of the Great Estates initiative. From 1 April 2023, the service was incorporated into the council structure and the Community Gardening Coordinator posts made permanent. From 1 September 2023 the service was transferred from Communities to Parks and Natural Environment following a restructure.
4. There are also 18 longstanding formal allotments in the borough on LBS land. These allotments are managed by local allotment groups, which are responsible for managing and maintaining the site and managing their waiting list. It is believed that that waiting times for place on an allotment are significant, which underlines the importance of creating new growing plots through the AEG. The council's only relationship with these allotments are the leases to use the land, which are managed by the Property Division and the allotment holder's inclusion in the community garden network. The Community Garden Coordinators have no other involvement with formal allotments.

ALLOTMENT EXPANSION GUARANTEE (AEG)

5. The Community Gardening team supports residents to set up new community gardens and food growing plots (raised beds) on HRA land through the AEG. The service has created an AEG Commonplace link that gives information about the process for residents to create new community allotments and maps proposals. The team commissioned a Southwark portal on the national Good to Grow map identifying community gardens across the borough with links to the AEG page. This allows community gardens to advertise plots available and call out for volunteers or advertising events, as well as being a search engine for those looking for nearby growing spaces and community gardens.
6. The team developed the AEG process including site checks, governance agreements, maintenance agreements and plot holder agreements for gardening groups to run these

new spaces. The team works closely with colleagues in Resident Services, Public Health, Climate Change, Cleaner Greener Safer, Grounds Maintenance, the Trees and Ecology team and administrators of community funds to increase opportunities for and promote the benefits of community gardening and food growing.

7. Over the last three years, the service has helped create 17 new community gardens with 220 growing plots. Each project is resident-led with the CGCs working in partnership with local gardening groups to:
 - Establish a self-governing gardening group with appropriate governance processes and structures
 - Identify a feasible site
 - Co-design the garden
 - Identify resources
 - Run a consultation
 - Communicate with residents, TRA, RSO, Grounds Maintenance
 - Project manage the build
 - Provide training
 - Ensure there is a sustainable management plan
 - Help the gardening group become part of the Southwark network, joining the Good to Grow map and receive the e-newsletter sent out by the team
8. The AEG also allows the council to deliver the manifesto commitment to provide residents with a right to grow on council estates.
9. In addition to the quantitative success of increasing new gardens/plots, a survey of growers carried out in December 2022 highlighted the following quality of life benefits;
 - 92% said working in the garden improved their mood
 - 92% said it had increased their engagement with neighbours
 - 90% said they felt more positive about their estate
 - 56% said it had helped them get more involved in their community
 - 60% said it led to them to eat more vegetables
 - 33% said the garden had helped them save money

BUDGET AND CAPACITY

10. While becoming permanent members of staff is a positive development, moving out of the Great Estates programme means there is now no dedicated capital budget that the AEG can draw on to build new gardens. Instead, there is an agreed revenue budget of £35k plus £70k from HRA for salary and on costs following the transfer to Parks and Natural Environment.
11. This budget is used to support new and established AEG estate-based gardens, developing the network with events and training. It funds consultations for new groups coming through the AEG process. However, the main capital costs of new AEG gardens and growing plots will now be funded through fundraising by each gardening group, supported by the Community Gardening Coordinators. This is done through CGS and other external funds but slows down the process of new gardens being built. The team is currently exploring internal and external funding options to build new gardens.

COMMUNITY GARDENING NETWORK

12. A core task of the Community Gardening service is to develop the borough-wide Community Gardening network. The network comprises of all those involved in AEG projects, other existing community gardens, community gardening in parks, schools, housing associations and other communal spaces and larger organisations offering community gardening (including formal allotment holders). Currently there are 205 recipients of our e- newsletter; however, it is shared to wider groups by key contacts.

13. The network promotes peer-to-peer support to enable residents to share experience and good practice, promote mutual support and advocate for more greening and gardening opportunities in the borough. It also connects gardeners with council and external initiatives related to climate change, mental and physical wellbeing.
14. In July 2023 the service held the first of a series of listening events with community gardeners across the borough to hear directly about the challenges facing community gardening, discuss opportunities for future projects and develop a 2030 ambition for the sector. 26 people attended. There is considerable scope for developing the network as a proactive resident-led partner for the council. One of the outcomes was the ask for council support for a community gardening working group to focus on relevant topics. As a follow-on event, in October the team organised the first borough wide Community Gardening Working Party at the Paper Garden in Surrey Quays. 40 people attended the event. The working group focus was on solutions to dealing with green waste and increasing composting and made several interesting recommendations.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IDENTIFIED FROM NETWORK EVENTS

15. The key challenges identified at the July event related to issues with the council and wider context. These included access to funding. Community gardeners reported difficulties for larger sites with project workers accessing funding for ongoing project costs. Gardeners from smaller sites feel that the council's community funding processes were too complicated and make an unhelpful distinction between capital and revenue funding. Gardeners wanted more information about the council's use of pesticides. Those who community garden in parks find access to and charging for water in parks to be a challenge. Difficulties in renewing leases for larger community gardens such as Glengall Wharf was also highlighted. The group identified opportunities such as working together and sharing best practice which could be done by the network with some administrative support from the council Community Gardening team. Gardeners are keen to develop a community plant nursery/ larger educational community garden centre.
16. At the October event the working group focussed on solutions for improving composting and dealing with green waste at community gardens (one of the issues identified in July). Key challenges are lack of training, resource and volunteer time. Community composting hubs based at existing food growing gardens on estates were suggested. This would focus on increasing composting skills and infrastructure, together with partnership working with Grounds Maintenance and Trees teams who could deliver compost materials from the estate to compost on site. These hubs could act as demonstration sites for others to visit and learn from.

BIODIVERSITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE PARTNERSHIP WORKING

17. Gardening groups are key greening activists as growing food often acts as a gateway to wider greening activities. Through working in partnership with ecology and climate change officers community gardening contributes in tackling the biodiversity crisis and climate change mitigation in the following ways:
 - Behavioural change; community based adaptation to climate change, gardening groups start other greening activities around their garden (meadows, orchards, pollinator planting, wildlife ponds, green roofs, SUDS)
 - Transforming monoculture grass to increased habitat and forage for biodiversity e.g. meadow creation
 - Contribute to reducing the effects of urban heat islands
 - Increasing storm water retention
 - Composting and green waste management on site, retaining carbon
 - Increased connection of urban population to nature, link to increased interest in low

carbon lifestyle choices

18. Climate aware garden design and growing techniques are employed by:

- The Circular economy - upcycling and using sustainable materials
- Rainwater harvesting wherever possible. Planting designed to reduce water run-off (i.e. mulch and ground cover plants) and soil erosion (winter crops or green manures).
- Including trees, reducing hard landscaping (planting trees in garden reduces temperature, creating shade)
- Growing food all year round, not just spring and summer, perennial veg and fruit, successional planting
- Increasing biodiversity through design planting to provide breeding space, food and habitat for different species, include native species
- Soil health – organic techniques improving and maintaining soil health for carbon sequestration.
- Peat-free compost use (if buying in) and using garden and estate waste to make compost

19. The Community Gardening Co-ordinators will continue to increase number of growing projects and keep building the skills of groups to empower communities through the development of a Sustainable Community Project Guide and Estate Ecology Plans in close association with Cleaner Greener Safer colleagues.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

20. Another important role of the service is to champion the benefits of community gardening across the council, as well as -represent the council in relevant external forums. The Community Gardening Coordinators contribute and review project plans/strategies and provide advice to colleagues on a wide variety of policy areas, including:

- Sustainable Food Strategy
- Climate Change
- Land use
- Resident Participation
- Planning and New Homes
- Mental and physical wellbeing
- Public health research

21. The Coordinators also attend meetings and engage with external groups and organisations, including the bi-monthly intra-council network meetings facilitated by Sustain, the pan-London Capital Growth Working Party meetings, Natural England London Happier Outdoors Network, the Food Insecurity Network and the Southwark Biodiversity Partnership meetings.

COMMUNITY GARDENING PLAN & ACHIEVEMENTS/TARGETS 2023/24

22. The Plan achievements and targets are for the Service for 2023/24 seek to maintain continuity and to build on successes while allowing for new initiatives that takes account of resource availability and the views of stakeholders. The Plan focusses on 4 areas of work:

- The Allotment Expansion Guarantee (AEG)
- The Community Gardening Network
- Policy development
- A new Community Composting initiative
- The above to be taken forward to form the basis of the 2024/25 plan.

23. Achieved to date:

- The AEG process has established a right for residents to set up and run food growing on estates
- 51 plots have been achieved in 23/24 to date with 9 scheduled for completion in March 2024
- Two networking events including first working group
- Support Public Health and Climate Change Team in strategy review
- Food growing training at AEG projects in their first year

24. Ongoing:

- Supporting residents in setting up new AEG projects (5 projects are in development this year, approximately 35 new plots).
- Developing the brief for community composting pilot

25. NEXT STEPS:

Project	Timeframe
Events Training Funding for composting pilot project	Delivery by March 2024
Community Organising training	Delivery by March 2024
Sustainable Community Project Guide and Estate Ecology Plans	2024/25
Further delivery of community gardens and growing plots in association with the AEG	2024/25
Continuing to support The Community Gardening Network	2024/25

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Southwark Nature Action Plan 2020	Ecology - Southwark Council	J Fowgies 07925 637218

Climate Change Action Plan	Our climate strategy - Southwark Council	
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