

The Church Road Allotments

What has Steep Parish Council¹ done about them in the last 20 years?

The Steep Parish Council Failures

Steep Parish Council was required to deliver:	What Steep Parish Council should have done	What the Council actually did:
Designation of Allotments Officers.	An allotments officer should be designated to maintain an authority's active allotments policy.	There was no active allotments policy. The Council was "adamant" that the Church Road allotments were to be disposed of and developed for housing – the Council wanted to eliminate the allotment. The Council padlocked the gate.
Providing Facilities	Lay on water on site: this is critical in encouraging plot-holders.	No water was provided at the Church Road allotment because it seems the Council did not want to encourage allotments. Water was apparently laid on at Steep Marsh allotments.
Encouraging, Maintaining and Broadening Demand	There is a need for greater promotion by the local authority by a range of simple measures which bring the availability of allotments to the attention of the general public.	Not done. The Council, it seems, did not want to bring the availability of allotments to the attention of the residents of Steep or the general public. The gate was padlocked.
	A notice on site displaying the number of vacant plots and a telephone number to contact.	Not done.
	Notices in libraries, the Village Hall and other public places, newsletters, advertisements in shops and the local press.	Not done.

¹ The conduct of Steep Parish Council is compared with the standards and practice required by Parish Councils as set out in the Parliamentary Select Committee Report of June 1998; and the Local Government Association publication "Growing in the Community" 2nd ed 2009.

	One plot should be made child-friendly by converting it into a children's play area.	Not done.
Measures should be taken to ensure that interest in allotments is translated into demand for plots.	Newly-let plots should be cleared and rotovated just prior to the plot-holder taking possession.	Not done.
Where the demand for allotments continues to fall short of the current provision, it may be appropriate to adopt a flexible approach to the use of allotment land.	Convert the site, or part of the site, to open space for use by the general public. These areas can be converted back to allotments as demand increases.	Not done.
Plot Size and Sharing	Offering smaller plots is one way of stimulating and sustaining greater demand.	Not done.
	Encourage people to share plots, particularly where this involves a younger, novice gardener with a more experienced but less physically able gardener.	Not done.
Self-management	Self-management of allotment sites involves local authorities devolving responsibilities for many of the day-to-day issues of site management to the allotment society or committee.	Steep Parish Council told the Charity Commission in 2013 that the Steep Allotment Society was part of a SPOILING operation. Gate padlocked.
Promotion of the allotments ²	"Good promotion creates demand for allotments and converts latent demand into real demand".	Not done. SPC followed a policy of showing that the allotments were not being used and were not available for use. The gate was padlocked and requests by persons resident in the parish was refused.
Promotion of the allotments by telling potential plot holders what they need to know	Potential ploholders need to know that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • plots exist; • plots are available; • plots are affordable; 	Not done.

² LGA "Growth in the Community" page 32.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • plots are located not far from their homes; • plots are easy to rent; • help for new tenants is available; • plots mean good exercise and fresh food. 	
Raise awareness in the Parish and in the neighbourhood. Use flyers.	“raise awareness of allotment gardening, the existence of plots in the neighbourhood and the procedures for renting a plot”.	Not done.
Use a simple procedure for obtaining a plot	<p>“The procedure for obtaining a plot can be put very simply on a single page. To gain access to an allotment site you will need to call at the environment and leisure help desk in the council office to collect a key. You will be asked to pay a deposit of £10.00.</p> <p>Information is then given about the size of the available plots, the rent to be paid and any concessions.</p> <p>When you have visited an allotment and found a plot you like, please complete the allotment agreement form enclosed and return it to the address shown above.</p> <p>Information is then given about the size of the available plots, the rent to be paid and any concessions.</p> <p>Once your agreement has been received, a letter confirming your tenancy will be sent to you with an invoice for the rent due.</p>	<p>Not done.</p> <p>The gate was padlocked and there was no indication given by the SPC as to who held the key and how to obtain the key. When residents asked to use the allotments, they were denied such use.</p> <p>Not done.</p> <p>Not done – no agreement form was made available.</p>
Rules governing the allotments	Rules for the allotments to be established and available from the Parish Council	Not done. When asked for a copy, none was supplied.

Provide allotment pack for new plotholders	Issue new plotholders with an allotment tenants pack which contains the tenancy agreement, information on gardening courses and organic gardening, composting leaflets, the Growers Grapevine newsletter, a copy of Kitchen Garden magazine, and even free seeds (when available).	Not done.
Provide information	Many information leaflets and booklets are available free of charge.	Not done.
It should be easy to find out about the availability of allotment plots and to contact the council	Contact details and information on plot availability should be made easily available in council contact centres and on the local authority's website. At local level, information can be provided on the allotment notice board – which should be visible from outside the site – so that a single telephone enquiry or e-mail will enable the prospective tenant to make an application for a plot.	Not done. Nothing on the website showed or shows this.
'The Future for Allotments' ³ inquiry report noted that: 'Some authorities pursue an active approach to maintaining vibrant and fully-occupied allotment sites whilst others appear at best lethargic and at worst to be instrumental in encouraging the decline of interest in allotments. Without a positive local approach, it seems likely that much of the demand for allotments will always remain latent.'		SPC pursued a policy of discouraging interest in the allotments since the SPC wanted to dispose of the allotments to a developer. The SPC, it seems, wanted to stifle any interest in the allotments.
There needs to be a general positive policy in support of the allotments	Allotments need to be actively promoted and the following should be considered:	Not done.

³ The Parliamentary Select Committee Report of June 1998.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a clear and simple procedure for obtaining an allotment; • a clear indication of vacancies at each site, accessible both centrally and at the site entrance; • information on plot rent (many prospective tenants will be unaware of how affordable allotments really are); • contact numbers of either the council allotment manager (or officer in charge of allotment letting) or of the managing association, available at the site and on all publicity documents; • a strategy for advertising the availability and benefits of allotments, not only through conventional means but also targeted at groups who are currently underrepresented in the allotment gardening community; • a periodic assessment and review of the advertising strategy; • an awareness of other authorities' advertising initiatives. 	<p>Not done.</p> <p>Not done.</p> <p>Not done.</p> <p>Not done.</p> <p>Not done.</p> <p>Not done.</p> <p>Not done.</p>
Other Councils provide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing times when allotment sites are open to the public so that prospective tenants can look around; • organising an 'allotments fair' early in the year when prospective ploholders can inspect a site, talk to site representatives and take up a vacant and prepared plot on the same day; • a postcard drop targeted at those areas of the Parish where the allotments exist; • working in partnership with voluntary organisations concerned with promoting sustainability and healthy 	

	living; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assisting and promoting courses on allotment cultivation at local colleges; • organising a competition to design a promotional poster - this could be one of the events at a horticultural show 	
Council should encourage and generate positive publicity for allotments	Allotment managers should also encourage activities that will help to generate widespread and positive publicity for allotments	<p>Not done. SPC wanted to discourage interest in the allotments since they wanted to sell to a developer.</p> <p>The Minutes⁴ show that one Councillor “pointed out that, with the best will in the world, allotments are not very attractive - especially in winter – and circulated photos of allotments in Sheet to back this up”</p>
Many local authorities offer some form of incentive or assistance to new tenants. The simplest of these is a concessionary rent offered for the first year of the tenancy for anyone who takes over an overgrown plot.		<p>Not done. SPC did not want to let the allotments and left all the 11 plots rough to discourage any idea of the allotments being used. The Council used the word “the field” as a description of the Oldest Statutory Allotments in the Country.</p>
Bristol City Council recognises that there is nothing more demoralising to a potential tenant than having to face an uncultivated plot		The allotments were left uncultivated.

⁴ MINUTES OF A MEETING WITH CHURCH ROAD REPRESENTATIVES HELD ON 26TH OCTOBER 2009

Other material

Open days and National Allotments Week

Many successful associations will confirm that the most successful form of promotion is the simplest: word of mouth. If so, then the second must be the open day. If visitors have an opportunity to experience at first hand the pleasure that individual plotholders derive from their pastime, the taste of fresh vegetables pulled straight from the ground, and the camaraderie between people that turns an allotment site into a living community, then the chances are that they will consider taking on a plot. In recent years associations have been encouraged to open their gates as part of National Allotments Week, which is organised by the National Allotment Gardens Trust (www.NAGTrust.org) each August. In this way, local promotion can be augmented by national publicity, and by the additional credibility that this brings. Open days can also be combined with other annual celebrations, such as Mothers Day or Apple Day, and with promotional events. For example, an exhibition on allotments is held in Southend Library during National Allotments Week, featuring allotment photographs, fresh produce displays, and a free prize draw of allotment books and DVDs. This event is organised through a partnership between the library, Springfield allotments and the council's allotments officer. Allotment gardeners in Bexley have a display stand in the main shopping centre during National Allotment Week that celebrates the value of allotments to families. Children have fun decorating empty egg shells or small flowerpots with faces, then fill them with cotton wool; sprinkling with water and fast-growing salad rape seeds so that they can watch the hair on their allotment 'egg heads' grow.

Planning

The LCA document Growth in the Community provides information as to allotments in the context of planning including the assessment of need.

PPG 17 is underpinned by extensive guidance to local authorities on how to assess the need for open space, including allotments, in the document Assessing needs and opportunities: a companion guide to PPG 17 (2002) (www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1144068). While the reference to allotments in this guidance is helpful (see box), it should be noted that waiting lists should not be treated as the only indicator of unmet demand, as they only capture unmet demand that has been expressed. In some areas the closure of waiting lists as a response to heavy demand may lead to systematic underassessment of local need. Expressed demand will also be conditional on the extent to which allotments have been actively promoted to all sections of the community, and will remain latent if they are not. There is at present no generally accepted procedure for assessing the gap between current use levels and waiting lists and the potential additional need for allotments if actively promoted.

The demand for allotments may also be spatially localised within the local authority area, and may be out of step with the pattern of provision – an imbalance that may not be apparent from aggregate figures. Access to allotments should therefore also be taken into account in defining standards: the ANGSt standard developed by Natural England for access to natural green space is a useful guideline (www.english-nature.org.uk/pubs/publication/PDF/526.pdf).

“The need for allotments, community gardens and urban farms is likely to rise with the growth of interest in organic farming and as a result of rising housing densities and the consequential reduction in the size of many gardens. The number of allotments required in any area is a function of demand and therefore it will be appropriate to use a demand-led methodology, based on local authority records. It is obviously desirable for local authorities not only to provide and rent allotments, but also to keep a waiting list as this helps to identify the level of unmet demand and its spatial distribution. Accordingly there is likely to be a need for a population-based provision standard, coupled with an accessibility standard or distance threshold.” (from DTLR (now CLG): Assessing needs and opportunities: a companion guide to PPG17 (2002) annex A - open space typology.