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# Rotherham Allotment Alliance Ltd

## Business Plan

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# 1. Mission Statement

## 1.1 Our Purpose

The Rotherham Allotments Alliance provides, promotes, and develops allotments in Rotherham to offer people of all backgrounds and abilities opportunities to enjoy gardening in safe, secure, accessible and environmentally sustainable surroundings. To do so, it makes efficient use of available resources to ensure that the service is financially self-sufficient whilst remaining affordable to those who want to use it. The Alliance operates as a Community Benefit Society which is registered as non-profit making with any surplus being retained by the Alliance, used for the benefit of its members.

It is doing this by:

- enabling allotment societies to flourish on sites where they already exist
- providing guidance and support to such societies where required
- managing sites which do not have societies efficiently
- promoting the establishment of new allotment societies on sites that do not currently have them and/or establishing a volunteer base for sites that are unable to form a society
- developing and implementing plans for the improvement and promotion of allotment gardening across the borough of Rotherham.

## 1.2 Why the Rotherham Allotments Alliance is needed.

Following the review conducted in 2018 by Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, the Rotherham Allotment Alliance was established to realise the potential of allotments through self-management, within available resources.

## 1.3 Rotherham Allotment Alliance Current Position.

The RAA has now been in full operation for 4 years. Unfortunately, the full legal transfer is still not yet completed. Frustratingly, this matter has now dragged on into 2024. Both sides' solicitors have been tasked with reaching a speedy conclusion to the situation. It is hoped that this will be resolved during 2024.

The Alliance employs an administrator (seconded by RMBC) to deal with all administrative duties involved in managing the allotment sites under the Alliance control, undertaking plot lettings, rent collection, the organization of site maintenance and emergency works, financial management including invoicing and payments including budget setting. During 2023 our previous Allotment Support Officer, Donna Bushby, left the post in March and recruitment of our new ASO was completed in August, when Jamie Calvert was appointed. During the intervening period, Directors undertook the duties of the post. This unfortunately has led to delays in upgrading works at some sites. We intend to quickly bring this work on stream.



Plot clearance and site improvements have still been the main focus of 2023 with a considerable amount of clearance work being done on a number of sites, using the Community Payback service. This has meant that funds have been channelled into waste removal, rather than labour costs. Sites that still need work have been identified and the incentive of discounted or free rent is being offered to new tenants where applicable. The RAA hopes to continue the relationship with Community Payback in 2024 and carry out work on other sites.

The RAA has also had to become involved in resolving internal society issues which were affecting the overall management of the sites and adversely affecting the allotment tenants on these sites. The RAA will continue to facilitate the establishment of new societies and assist existing societies where difficulties are being encountered in managing the sites either through difficulty in recruiting active volunteers and for any other reason.



## 2. Services

### 2.1 What we do

The principal business of the Rotherham Allotments Alliance is to sustain and improve allotment sites and services previously provided by the Council. The main elements of these services are as follows:

#### Routine allotment management and maintenance

- Letting of allotment plots on directly managed sites, including management of waiting lists, plot preparation and collection of rents.
- Temporary letting of unused allotment land for other compatible uses, including grazing.
- Maintenance and improvement of directly managed sites, including grass, hedges, trees, boundaries, gates, access roadways and paths, water supplies, communal buildings,
- Preparation of vacant plots before re-tenanting.
- Letting of allotment sites to allotment societies and/or establishing a volunteer base
- For the last two years the RAA has undertaken the task of vermin control directly using 'Director volunteers' to complete the labour element. There have also been volunteers at some society-managed sites who have obtained the necessary qualifications to complete the duties at their sites. The RAA has funded the training.

#### Service development

- Developing networks to support existing allotment societies.
- Encouraging and supporting the formation of new societies on sites without self-management.
- General promotion and development of allotment gardening across Rotherham.

### 2.2 The Value of Our Services

Allotments are unique in that they provide ordinary people with opportunities to enjoy open-air recreation, physical activity, food production, contact with nature, social interaction, practical skills development, and volunteering at an affordable price and close to home. Rotherham Allotments Alliance will add further value to this resource by giving allotment gardeners and other supporters a real say in how services are developed, and by harnessing their knowledge and enthusiasm to extend the benefits of allotments within the local community.

### 2.3 Scale

The capacity of the Alliance to deliver these services is largely dependent on the amount of land available for allotment gardening. The current provision (updated in 2023 by the RAA) allows it to offer up to 367 allotment plots covering a total of 12.10 hectares on 10 directly managed sites, and a further 831 plots managed by societies on 15 sites covering 28.69 hectares. Plus, an additional 2.46



hectares of grazing land. However, in practice, this capacity was reduced by past failure to maintain vacant plots in a condition that made them suitable for letting. Some areas of land are also no longer useable as allotments for reasons such as flooding. With better planning, it has been possible to increase the number of opportunities for individuals to participate by subdividing large plots into smaller areas. In the longer term, it may also be possible to develop additional plots on 4 statutory allotment sites, totalling 3.7 hectares, that are currently uncultivated, and to bring other allotment sites, currently administered by others, into the Alliance.

## 2.4 Ensuring Quality

The continued success and viability of this business depend on the Alliance's ability to assure the continuing quality of the services offered. For this reason, the Alliance will develop and implement a performance framework in association with site societies, that will include, for example:

- expenditure
- income
- member satisfaction
- proportion of land under cultivation and let
- waiting lists
- complaints from members and neighbouring residents

It will monitor this information to identify trends, set targets, address areas of weakness and drive service improvement.

The Alliance will also take steps to ensure its services remain relevant and up to date. For example, it will undertake periodic reviews of best practices elsewhere in allotment service provision. As a member of the National Allotment Society (NAS), the Alliance will actively engage in networking and information sharing to support this.



## 3. Social Impact

### 3.1 The Local Community

The Rotherham Allotments Alliance serves people living in and around Rotherham. The area comprises the urban centre of Rotherham and several smaller settlements and countryside surrounding it. Approximately 75% of the land area of Rotherham borough is rural. The latest estimate of Rotherham's population is 266,183 (2021 census).

The growth of Rotherham's urban areas during the 19th and 20th centuries was driven largely by industrial development, particularly coal, iron and steel. These traditional industries have declined greatly over the past thirty years, with negative impacts on the local community. Rotherham is currently the 44th most deprived district in England (in most deprived 14% nationally). This has improved since 2015 when it was the 52nd most deprived district and in the most 16% deprived nationally. The employment rate in Rotherham is 73.5% compared to the English average of 75.7%. The employment rate for BME (Black and minority ethnic) people is 61.8% and for white people it's 74.1%.

#### **Economically inactive adults in Rotherham**

(Data from ONS Annual Population Survey Oct 2021 - Sep 2022).

There are 34,300 economically inactive adults. Of these 11,250 are long term sick, 7,195 are claiming JSA/UC, 5,909 are retired and 5,556 are looking after the family or home.

#### **Education**

(Data from Jan - Dec 2021 ONS APS).

Using NVQ qualifications as the comparator, Rotherham has a lower qualified population than Yorkshire and Humberside and the UK in all levels but especially in those with no qualifications (8.3% compared to 7.8% and 6.6% respectively) and those with Level 4 (31.9% compared to 38% and 43.6% respectively).

#### **Adult Social Care**

(22nd March 2023)

There are 3,500 individuals in Rotherham accessing adult social care. Aged 18 - 64 there are 798 males and 636 females (7.5% BME - Black and minority ethnic). Aged 65+ there are 692 males and 1388 females (2.4% BME).

The 3 largest groups accessing support are:

- physical - 55%
- learning disability - 22.25%
- mental health - 10.7%

#### **Loneliness**

(Identified as a serious health concern by the government in 2021 and this data is from 2022)

People with higher well-being have lower rates of illness, recover more quickly and for longer. They generally have better physical and mental health.



- 20.4% aged 16+ self reported high anxiety
  - 55.9% of adult social care users 18+ self reported they didn't have as much social contact as they'd like
  - 49.8% of adult social carers self reported they didn't have as much social contact as they'd like
- People over 65 who are living alone have significantly high feelings of loneliness and isolation. The worst wards for this are: Boston Castle, Maltby, Rawmarsh, Rotherham East, Rotherham West, Swinton and Wingfield.

### **Using this information**

The Rotherham Allotment Alliance feels it can make an impact with the following groups:

- Those accessing Adult Social Care, especially females over the age of 65 as this group is double the numbers of males over 65
- Those claiming JSA/UC especially the group aged 25+

*(Rotherham Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, Rotherham Demographic Profile 2023)*

## **3.2 The Role of Rotherham Allotments Alliance**

Rotherham Allotments Alliance can help to address needs arising from local deprivation by making better use of allotments to provide opportunities for people to be more physically active, reducing isolation, developing skills and building personal confidence. This has been especially important since the pandemic and also with current rising living costs.

Currently there are 1198 plots on Council-owned allotment sites. Currently, there are 88 people on waitlists for direct-managed sites. The aim is to increase the number and range of people involved in allotment gardening and associated activities, for example by:

- Re-instating disused plots to make them suitable for letting and removing historic waste.
- Improving access, welfare and other facilities to make sites more attractive to a wider range of users.
- Promoting allotment gardening more effectively, and introducing more effective procedures for plot letting.
- Enforcing cultivation standards more rigorously, conducting regular inspections, to ensure efficient use of available plots.
- Supporting existing allotment societies, and the development of new societies.
- Working in partnership with other bodies to engage with the wider community through events, volunteering opportunities, education and training etc.

Not only would the number and diversity of people benefitting from allotment gardening and associated activities increase, but the condition of allotment sites would also improve, with associated visual amenities, and environmental and horticultural benefits.

## **3.3 Measuring Social Impact**





Delivery of benefits of allotment gardening to the local community is dependent on the availability of plots, and the number of people engaging in the activity. So that the Rotherham Allotments Alliance can monitor and report on its performance in this regard, it will use the following primary measures:

- Total number of plots
- % of plots cultivated and let
- Number of members
- Number of people on waiting lists

As a large proportion of plots are on sites managed by societies, then the Alliance will work with those societies to incorporate data from their sites into the above measures. The Alliance will also be able to develop secondary measures as necessary to monitor the performance of specific activities and projects. These could include environmental measures, for example, the total length of hedges within allotment sites.



## 4. Our Customers and Stakeholders

### 4.1 Allotment Plot-holders

This group is of fundamental importance to the business of the Rotherham Allotments Alliance. Allotment Plot-holders are the main customers of the service, and income from the rent they pay is essential for continuing service provision. On directly managed sites, such people pay rent directly to the Alliance who is responsible for managing all aspects of the service they receive. On society-managed sites, plot-holders pay rent to the society, who then pay rent to the Alliance. In these cases, plot-holders will benefit from certain services provided by the Alliance, as well as other support provided by the Alliance to their society as required.

Total rent income from directly managed and society sites is expected to be sufficient to cover the cost of service delivery because the Council have been managing allotments on this basis before their transfer to the Alliance. Furthermore, it is expected that the Alliance will achieve efficiency savings through alternative procurement arrangements and the use of volunteers.

Plot-holders also constitute the overwhelming majority of the membership of the Alliance and therefore are able to influence key decisions taken by it. It is also expected that most volunteers, including directors, will be drawn from this group.

The Alliance engages with plot-holders directly through its website, social media, letter and email correspondence and annual general meetings where members can vote on important issues. Bi-annual meetings for both shareholders and societies have also been introduced to allow for the sharing of ideas and information between tenants and the board of directors. By volunteering to become involved in the running of the Alliance by becoming a director, or to help with specific projects, plot-holders will be able to engage more actively.

### 4.2 Other Members

Membership is not restricted to plot-holders. Anyone who supports the aims of the Rotherham Allotments Alliance may become a member. This might include former allotment gardeners, people on waiting lists, and representatives of other local community bodies.

The Alliance will engage with supporter members in the same ways as with plot-holders. An annual subscription of £3.00 will be payable to maintain membership. Supporter members will need to pay subscriptions annually.

### 4.3 Site Allotment Societies

Societies are also very important stakeholders. They are relied upon by their members for day-to-day site management. Indeed, the proven effectiveness of such local management, as identified through a user survey in 2017, has been a major driver leading to the establishment of the Alliance. The Alliance



will also need the support of Societies in membership administration, for example, maintenance of member names and contact details, and collection of performance data.

One of the principle aims of the Alliance is to maintain an environment where site societies can flourish. It will do this by:

- Continuing to provide services and other support to societies where this is more practical or cost-effective than the society doing things itself.
- Providing specialist advice, either directly or through partnerships with other organisations.
- Facilitating and encouraging mutual support networks amongst different societies.
- Promoting allotments generally to help maintain demand for plot rentals.
- Engaging with societies, by correspondence or meetings, to ensure their interests are considered when making decisions.
- Encouraging society representatives to stand for election as directors of the Alliance.
- Ensuring lease terms and conditions, and rents are fair and reasonable.

#### **4.4 Rotherham Borough Council**

Whilst the Council has chosen to be less directly involved in the management of its allotments, it will still have a significant interest in the work of the Alliance. This will include the following:

- Continued delivery of allotments on Council land in line with requirements of the Allotment Acts.
- Sustainability of self-management arrangements.
- Proper conduct of the Alliance, in the best interests of plot-holders and the local community generally.
- Ensuring a dynamic and engaged allotment community in Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council.
- For allotments in Rotherham to be recognised nationally as a beacon of good practice.

The Council will be closely engaged in the strategic management of the Alliance by nominating two elected members to act as its representatives on the board of directors.

#### **4.5 Related Associations**

The Alliance will work with any bodies associated with allotment gardening, either on a local or national Level, i.e. National Allotment Society (NAS) and Rotherham and District Allotment Association (RaDAA).

#### **4.6 Other Allotment Providers**

Other allotment providers within the area of Rotherham MBC include Parish Councils and private landowners. The RAA will work in partnership with these providers to promote allotment gardening. The RAA would also consider management opportunities for any sites if requested by the provider.



Other allotment providers will not have any automatic role in the governance of the Alliance. However, it is envisaged that they may work in partnership with the Alliance, for example, to promote allotment gardening to a wider audience, or to share resources.

#### **4.7 Wider Community**

The wider community in Rotherham and the surrounding area will have an interest in the successful management of allotments so they do not become a nuisance to neighbouring areas, but rather that allotments and allotment gardeners make a positive contribution to the quality of life for the wider local community.

The wider community will not have any automatic role in the governance of the Alliance. However, individuals who support the aims of the Alliance may apply to become members.



## 5. Marketing Plan

### 5.1 Market Segments

#### 5.1.1 Time-rich

This group includes people who are retired, unemployed, working part-time or who have few other commitments. Currently, a large proportion of plot-holders are from this segment, reflecting the fact that allotment gardening is a great way of staying fit and active when otherwise one might become sedentary and under-occupied.

#### 5.1.2 Time-poor

Many people in full-time employment or education, bringing up children, or caring for elderly or disabled relatives, can struggle to find time to do things they enjoy and to find relief from the stresses of everyday life. Results of the 2017 allotment user survey appear to confirm this, with just 10% of respondents being younger than 40, 37% being between 40 and 59, and 53% being 60 or older. This group can stand to benefit hugely from an activity like allotment gardening, but marketing to them must consider the difficulties they face in making a commitment. The dividing of plots is of benefit to this group as a smaller plot will be much more manageable than a larger space.

#### 5.1.3 People who might feel excluded

Analysis of the 2017 user survey gives some insight into groups who might currently feel unable or unwilling to get involved in allotment gardening. For example, only 24% of respondents were female, compared to 50.8% in the general population. 5% were from a BEM community, compared to 8.1% in the general population. However, the number of respondents who stated they had a disability was relatively high, at 27%. The proportion of people in the general population with a limiting long-term illness is 21.9%.

One of the agreed aims of the Alliance is to widen participation in allotment gardening. The above figures suggest that marketing efforts may need to be focused on females and people from BEM communities, but the Alliance will also seek to identify and address the needs of others who feel excluded because of physical or cultural barriers.

### 5.2 Competition

Allotments are generally provided as a public service by statutory allotment authorities covering specific geographical areas. Thus, there is very limited competition in the allotment market itself.



However, allotments do have to compete for people's leisure time and spending against other activities including a wide range of sports and hobbies, home entertainment, socialising, and travel.

Some competitors benefit from large marketing budgets, not readily available to allotment providers. Others may appear attractive because they do not involve making a significant long-term time commitment, or because they can be accessed without having to leave the home.

However, allotment gardening has several competitive advantages which, in combination, represent a unique selling point. These include the ability to produce something of value, freedom to start and finish at times to suit individual needs and preferences, ability to work either independently or collaboratively, physical activity, spending time outside, escape from the built environment and stress of everyday life, low cost, learning and skills development, and pride in the fruits of one's efforts.

## 5.3 Marketing Methods

### 5.3.1 Research

Whilst possible marketing techniques have already been identified, as discussed below, the Alliance will seek to improve its understanding of the effectiveness of different methods to reach different market segments. Such research can include:

- Surveys of non-users (e.g. at events, or on-line) to find out why they don't have an allotment, and what would encourage them to start.
- Asking new users why they decided to start allotment gardening.
- Networking with other providers and national organisations to identify what has worked well elsewhere.
- Exploring innovative techniques used by other types of business.
- Survey tenant demographics.

It will also monitor the effectiveness of different marketing methods, listed below, by recording the numbers of enquiries generated, the number of new starters, retention rates after 3 months, 6 months and 1 year, and costs.

### 5.3.2 Working with Site Societies

The Alliance sees it as being able to spearhead efforts to improve public awareness of and enthusiasm for allotment gardening. However, to be as effective as possible it must work closely with individual site societies to deliver a joined-up message and to add value to each other's marketing activity. Therefore, it will be keen to pursue the following methods not only by itself but also in partnership with site societies.

To foster a closer working relationship and partnership with Allotment Societies who administer their allotment sites directly, the RAA introduced bi-annual forum meetings specifically aimed for attendance by Allotment Society representatives. The RAA AGM (usually held in late March) gives the opportunity for discussion and agenda setting for two further meetings to be held in months 7 and 11



each year. The agreed agendas will be the basis of discussion to further the improvements of allotment provision within the remit of the RAA to meet both the individual Allotment Societies and RAA aims and objectives. Unfortunately, there would appear to be reluctance from certain societies to become positively engaged in participation in these meetings.

### **5.3.3 Website**

To improve the customer experience with the RAA, the website is under development to become the core of the Alliance's external engagement. This development will see the transition from a blog-style website to an interactive hub for primary engagement. The website address will be included on all branded documents and correspondence templates.

The following improvements are planned for 2024;

Improved usage analytics – Increased understanding of the reach of the website and user engagement. Further development can be informed through this learning.

Accessibility – Improving accessibility through simplified layout and navigation. Ensuring consistent branding and logical links to guide the user experience. Updating all content for mobile optimisation to ensure a consistent experience for users of all device types.

Quality content – Auditing existing content and creating new content based on user feedback and demand. This will be measured using feedback surveys and site analytic data.

Society site hub – New pages with secure access for Society Secretaries will be introduced. This will allow standardised and secure submission of updates to tenant data. Resource libraries and other elements will be developed based on user feedback.

### **5.3.4 Social Media**

The Alliance has an existing presence on Facebook and Instagram, primarily used to promote the RAA and post important news and events. Social media accounts will act as satellite platforms to support engagement with the website as the primary hub. To balance the ASO's workload, social media accounts and posts will direct user engagement through the website rather than allowing user engagement directly through those platforms.

Links to social media platforms will be integrated into the new tenant documents pack to encourage engagement.

Branding and content on social media will remain consistent with the website to reinforce the RAA brand and public image.

User analytics will be used to monitor the effectiveness of social media use.

### **5.3.5 Site Notices**



Conduct a survey among the tenants of the allotment sites before the installation of any noticeboards. Use this data to determine which sites may or may not benefit from noticeboards. Collect feedback from the users about the usefulness of the noticeboards. Keep a record of how often new notices are posted and how long they stay up. If possible, compare allotment sites with and without noticeboards. This can provide a more direct comparison of the benefits and influence further decisions for installing new noticeboards.

Consider the tangible benefits (like reduced rule-breaking) and intangible (like improved community feeling) benefits of notice boards.

### 5.3.6 Events

The annual Rotherham Show, well-known locally for its display of produce from allotments, attracts thousands of visitors. It therefore offers a unique opportunity to reach a diverse audience with a large proportion on people who may already have an interest in horticulture.

The RAA will be represented by the ASO and directors at the 2024 Rotherham Show. The focus will be on promoting the RAA brand and engaging with potential tenants.

### 5.3.7 Partnerships

The Alliance understands that some under-represented groups may be hard to reach due to cultural or intellectual barriers. It will therefore look to work with partners who have an existing profile within such communities, to communicate the opportunities offered by allotments in ways that are appropriate to the audiences in question. Such partnerships may also deliver solutions to overcome physical barriers where necessary, for example by providing specialist transport.

### 5.3.8 Special Schemes and Offers

As explained in section 5.1.2 above, it is likely that some people do not take on an allotment plot because they feel unable to commit sufficient time or energy to make it a success. The Alliance will explore the possibility of introducing introductory schemes and offers such as:

- Mini-plots (these could also be offered on a longer-term basis)
- Mentors
- Starter groups with shared plots
- Social events
- Adapted plots for universal access
- Community lettings. 2022/23 has seen a number of community groups being established on some sites and the RAA will help to promote these plots to volunteers.
- Rental discounts for new starters, when taking on a previously un-cultivated area, to allow plots to be brought into cultivation





## 6. Production and Process

### 6.1 Process by which inputs become outputs

The processes to be operated by the Alliance can be categorised as follows.

#### 6.1.1 Routine allotment management and maintenance

Commencing with pre-existing Council budgets and processes as a model, the Alliance sets service standards and deploys resources as necessary to deliver routine operations across directly managed sites to achieve these standards. In doing so, it monitors performance, reviews standards and explores alternative delivery options to achieve continuous improvement in service quality and value for money.

##### 6.1.1.1 Plot letting, tenancy administration and management of waiting lists (directly managed sites only)

The Alliance will continue to utilise the Colony online application, which has previously been used by the Council for all tenancy administration functions. The Allotment Support Officer is responsible for all of the administrative tasks associated with allotment lettings, i.e. issuing invoices, tenancy agreements and keys via both telephone and email.

##### 6.1.1.2 Administration of society tenancies

It is expected that this will be undertaken using the same method as that adopted for administration of individual tenancies on directly-managed sites. By utilising the Colony computer application, the Alliance offers administrative assistance to site societies, including maintenance of tenancy records, waiting lists and rule compliance.

##### 6.1.1.3 Site maintenance

This work includes maintenance of boundaries, trackways, communal areas and buildings, water supplies and vacant plots, as well as waste collection and pest control.

Previously, the Council has used a variety of methods to deliver this work. For example, general site maintenance has been done at times by dedicated staff members, and at other times by agency staff. Waste collection has involved commercial hire of skips, and pest control has been undertaken by contractors. The Alliance will assess cost-effectiveness of these and any other options for delivering



site maintenance, including volunteering, before selecting preferred methods. All such operations will be subject to continuous review and varied as necessary to ensure good value for money. Review of all services provided is still ongoing to determine the best course of action.

As well as delivering such services on its directly managed sites, the Alliance will continue to provide selected services on behalf of societies on their sites, as the Council did. It will jointly monitor the effectiveness and value of such services with societies, and jointly review whether to increase or reduce the range of services provided to them. A survey was conducted with societies to ask what services they were willing to undertake themselves. The results were very mixed so it was decided that maintenance such as grass and hedge cutting (where RMBC had provided provision) would continue to be offered to ensure a standardized and reliable offering to each site. In 2022, pest control was brought 'in-house' with site volunteers and Directors undertaking training to be able to distribute the bait. Any work carried out by outside organisations is monitored to ensure it is carried out to the required standard.

### **6.1.2 Service development**

The Directors are responsible for reviewing performance information, member feedback and best practice guidance to identify service development priorities. They also lead on service development planning, including resourcing strategies. However, they will seek advice and guidance, wherever possible at zero or minimum cost, from national and local organisations, including Co-operatives UK and the National Allotments Society.

External grants will be sought for major project development and delivery, again with the support of partners where possible. Small-scale projects and those with limited financial implications may be managed and delivered by Directors and other volunteers, subject to a robust assessment of risks. Such projects might include the development of mutual support networks, equipment purchases, small-scale events, and the development of new societies on sites that do not currently have them.

### **6.1.3 Advocacy, Fund-Raising, Promotion and External Communication**

The Alliance aims to raise the profile of Rotherham's allotments to help sustain and increase demand, to support fund-raising efforts, and build confidence in the allotment's movement both locally and nationally. Such efforts will be led by Directors who may create specialist teams of volunteers to deliver more focused work in this area. Where funds allow, consultancy support may also be used.

### **6.1.4 Membership Services**

All members of the Alliance, regardless of whether they rent an allotment plot or not, are entitled to view the following documents. These can be found on the RAA website ([rotherhamallotments.org.uk](http://rotherhamallotments.org.uk)) or hard copies can be posted on request.

- A copy of the annual report and accounts
- A copy of the rules and policies of the Alliance



- Minutes from board and sub-committee meetings
- An invitation to attend the Annual General Meeting, and any other general meetings called by the Alliance
- Vote in elections to appoint board members, and to vote on resolutions presented at general meetings (may include postal ballots)
- Stand for election as a board member
- A share certificate, and/or a statement of their share account

Additionally, the Alliance will make news and information about its activities available to all members and enable them to:

- Support the society as a volunteer, campaigner or provider of expertise
- Express their opinions about the society's policies and future plans
- Participate in the affairs of the society and learn how to become more actively involved
- Recommend the society to other people in the community.

The Alliance proposes to manage these membership services using the same systems it selects for tenancy administration (see section 6.1.1 (a) above).

## 6.2 Inputs

### 6.2.1 Income from Rents

Under Council provision, corporate billing and banking systems were used. Due to improvements with the Colony system, the Alliance is now sending out of rental invoices via email. The Alliance holds approximately 85% of tenants' email addresses so the remaining 15% will still be posted, or if requested by the tenant. It is identified that printing and postage costs will be reduced by using email. Payment methods offered are via online banking/bank transfer, cheque sent in the post or payment at a bank or Post Office. Tenants wishing to pay at the Post Office will need one of the RAA's paying-in slips which is provided on request. Postal payments are sent to the PO Box and collected weekly by the Allotment Support Officer/treasurer, who then logs payments and pays them into the bank/Post Office.

Any late payments are chased by the ASO who records any correspondence and issues any terminations where necessary.

### 6.2.2 Income from Share Purchase and Subscriptions

All plot holders at the time of RAA taking responsibility (2019) automatically became shareholders and £1.00 of their first rental at that time was placed in the share account – subsequently, £1.00 share certification is taken from the first rental payment of new tenants. Supporter/Associate members pay a subscription of £3.00 per annum, £1.00 from the first subscription being their share



certification the subscriptions will be collected using the same resources and systems that will be used for rent collection.

### **6.3 Finance**

In order to comply with legal requirements and in the interests of proper and efficient financial management, the Alliance will have to have systems in place for the following:

- Accounts preparation
- Payroll (if employing people)
- VAT advice, if necessary
- Book-keeping
- Reporting accounts report under requirements of the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014 Section 85, or audit, as necessary
- Insurance

The Treasurer, with the assistance of the ASO, will produce monthly statements, and also the annual statement to present to the Board. Following on from the use of a community auditor in 2021, the board has made the decision to use this service again as it is deemed to ensure good financial practices, with advice from a professional service. The Board has also established a Finance Subcommittee which meets approximately every six weeks to review spending and budgetary targets.

The RAA currently has both Public Liability to the value of £ 5 million and Employee Liability insurance to the value of £ 5 million.

### **6.4 Quality Assurance**

As described in section 2.4, the Alliance will implement quality assurance systems to maintain efficient use of resources, customer satisfaction and continuous service improvement, all of which are important to the long-term viability of the Alliance.

We will introduce a requirement for end-of-year comparison and analysis reports based on the development of the measures described in section 2.4.

### **6.5 Reporting to Members and Stakeholders**

The Alliance will share information with its members and other stakeholders to ensure transparency and accountability. This will include annual reporting of accounts (as required by law), results of customer satisfaction surveys, complaints monitoring data, membership statistics, allotment occupancy rates and waiting list numbers. Such information will be posted on the Alliance website and reported at AGMs in the form of an annual report.



## 7. Premises and Equipment

### 7.1 Premises

#### 7.1.1 Allotment Land

The allotment sites the Alliance requires to deliver the service have been in existence for many years before its establishment and will be leased to the Alliance by Rotherham Borough Council. Societies will be granted a sublease on their sites by the Alliance.

The recorded sizes, numbers of plots and plot status is given in the table below.

Size and occupancy	Direct Managed	Society	Total
number of sites	11	15	26
total area for cultivation (sq metres)	93,665	196,546	290,211
number of plots	361	982	1343
% plots let	85.00%	96.00%	91%
% plots unlettable	5.00%	2.00%	4%
% plots vacant	8.00%	1.00%	5%
% plots decommissioned	2.00%	1.00%	2%
Number on waiting lists	88	TBC	TBC

#### 7.1.2 Offices and Meeting Space

To minimise costs, the Alliance does not rent or buy a permanent office or meeting space. It is required to have a registered office address to register as a charitable community benefit society. This is currently 46 Celandine Rise Swinton, Mexborough, S64 8PL.

The Allotment Support Officer is employed on a work-from-home basis so most routine administration work is undertaken from domestic premises, although some societies have indoor space within their sites that could also be made available for this purpose.

Meetings will be held either in person or virtually. In-person meetings will be held in either society buildings, a space provided by the Council or other suitable meeting space, i.e. the Unity Centre. Virtual meetings will be facilitated by online meeting software, i.e. Microsoft Teams.



## 7.2 Equipment

### 7.2.1 Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

The Alliance ASO operates using a laptop with Microsoft 365 subscription, a colour laser printer and laminator. Stationery supplies are purchased when necessary and held by the ASO.

The Alliance has a mobile phone contract with a smartphone which is a dedicated number.

Additionally, the following specialist applications are being utilised:

- Accounting and book-keeping software. QuickBooks is used for online accounting offering flexibility for future expansion of services such as payroll and expenses.
- Allotment management database. The Alliance uses Colony, a purpose-built software, for all the allotment data management.



## 8. People

### 8.1 Directors

Short profiles of the Directors are given below.

**Brian Steele**

Role in Alliance: Chair  
Plot holder on a non-RAA site

**John Palmer**

Role in Alliance: Vice Chair  
Plot holder on Barnsley Rd allotment site  
Former Allotment Officer

**Jack Taylor**

Role in Alliance: Secretary  
Secretary and plot-holder on Wood St Site

**Sue Jackson**

Role in Alliance: Treasurer  
Plot holder on Rectory Field allotments

**Mohammed Suleman**

Role in Alliance: Board Member  
Plot holder on Clifton allotment site

**Mick Hirst**

Role in Alliance: Board Member  
Plot holder on Avenue Rd allotments

**Richard Watson**

Role in Alliance: Director  
Plot holder on Clifton Allotments

**Councillor David Sheppard**

Role in Alliance: RMBC appointed  
Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion

**Councillor Vacant**

Role in Alliance: RMBC appointed

### 8.2 Skills Gaps and how they will be filled

We are committed to ensuring that our board of directors has the necessary skills, knowledge, and experience to effectively govern and lead our organisation. To achieve this, we will conduct a skills audit of our current board members, using a self-assessment tool that covers various aspects of board performance, such as strategic planning, financial management, risk management, fundraising, and diversity.

The skills audit will help us identify the strengths and weaknesses of our board, as well as any gaps in skills or competencies that need to be addressed. Based on the results of the skills audit, we will develop an action plan to improve our board's effectiveness and efficiency.

Some of the possible actions include:

- Providing training and development opportunities for our existing board members, to enhance their skills and knowledge in areas where they need improvement.
- Recruiting new board members who have the skills and expertise that we are looking for, and who can bring fresh perspectives and insights to our board.



- Co-opting external experts or consultants to join our board on a temporary or permanent basis, to provide advice and guidance on specific issues or projects that require their specialised skills or experience.
- Reviewing and updating our board policies and procedures, to ensure that they reflect best practices and comply with relevant laws and regulations.





## 9. Organisational Structure

### 9.1 Rotherham Allotments Alliance

The Alliance is a Community Benefit Society established by the Council in partnership with representatives of allotment societies and individual allotment gardeners to take over the management and development of Council-owned allotments in Rotherham. It is run by and for its members. All individuals who rent a plot on an allotment managed by the Alliance, or leased by the Alliance to a society, automatically become plot-holder members (Shareholders). Membership is not restricted to these allotment gardeners, as others will be able to join as supporter/associate members. All members will purchase a share that entitles them to vote at general meetings of the Alliance. A further condition of membership is that people pay an annual subscription. Plot-holder members will have these payments deducted from their rent and will therefore have nothing extra to pay.

A Board of Directors are responsible for the management of the Alliance on behalf of the general membership. This is a 'Stakeholder Board' comprising up to 7 Directors elected by members, 2 Directors nominated by Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, and up to 2 other temporary Directors with particular skills or experience, co-opted by the Board as required.

The Alliance may choose to employ staff, contractors, and consultants as necessary for the efficient delivery of its services.

The functions and responsibilities of the Alliance are as follows:

#### 9.1.1 Governance

- Development and implementation of its own rules and regulations
- Setting service standards and monitoring systems
- First line step-in/rescue in case of failing Society
- Secretarial support and record-keeping for Alliance business

#### 9.1.2 Provision of Allotment Land

- Sub-let allotment sites to Allotment Societies
- Monitor demand for allotments across borough, including data supplied by Societies
- Make recommendations to RMBC for acquisition/disposal of allotment land
- Consider requests from Societies to surrender all or part of their leased land, and support them in finding alternative uses (e.g. grazing)
- Help RMBC in applying for permission to dispose of surplus allotment land, including statutory consultation.



### 9.1.3 Finance, insurance and staffing

- Employ staff as required
- Set annual budget for Alliance business (including staff costs)
- Calculate and collect rent payments from tenants on directly-managed sites and Societies
- Monitor own budget and report to members regularly
- Take out insurance cover as necessary for Alliance business
- Give members an opportunity to join the National Allotment Society and thereby enjoying overall benefits including personal insurance cover

### 9.1.4 Site Improvement and Maintenance

- Develop a 'site improvement plan' for all sites, prioritise the work required to complete these improvements to allow work to be completed when resources become available either through revenue funding or grant aid schemes.
- Deploy resources to help Societies with maintenance and improvement projects, and to arrange the following:
  - Regular safety inspections of trees across all sites, and arrange works as needed, with the permission of RMBC
  - Deal with invasive species, flooding and hazardous waste reported by Societies
  - Lead or support procurement for Societies of skips, pest control etc.
- Consider Society site improvement proposals, and decide whether to support
- Identify and share information about other external grant funding opportunities

### 9.1.5 Tenancy Management

- Sub-let allotment sites to Allotment Societies
- On directly-managed sites:
  - Provide information about how to rent a plot and plot availability
  - Manage waiting lists
  - Prepare vacant plots for letting
  - Issue tenancy agreements
  - Collect rents and other payments (e.g. water)
  - Take action to address under-payment, including possible termination of tenancy
  - Agree and issue site rules
  - Take action to address non-compliance, including enforcement and possible termination of tenancy
  - Respond to general enquiries from tenants
  - Take action to try to resolve disputes between tenants
  - Respond to complaints from tenants and others



### 9.1.6 Service Development and Promotion

- Champion all allotments, and provide a unified voice on matters of general interest
- Develop and implement borough-wide communications to promote the benefits of allotment gardening, including Alliance website
- Help Societies by encouraging new volunteers to strengthen sustainability and representativeness of committees
- Work with partners to reach under-represented and disadvantaged groups
- Share/promote good practice guidelines from national bodies and between Societies
- Encourage neighbouring Societies to form clusters for mutual support and resource sharing
- Arrange and promote skills development opportunities for volunteers in all Societies (e.g. training, mentoring)

### 9.2 Alliance Management Functions

<b>Board</b>	
<b>Function</b>	
Chair	Brian Steele
Vice Chair	John Palmer
Society Secretary	Jack Taylor
Treasurer	Sue Jackson

<b>Finance sub-committee</b>	
<b>Function</b>	
Chair	John Palmer
Treasurer	Sue Jackson
	Mohammed Sulleman
	Councillor Dave Sheppard

<b>Maintenance</b>	
<b>Function</b>	
Chair	Brian Steel
Secretary	Jack Taylor
	Mick Hirst
	Richard Watson



### **9.3 Rotherham Borough Council**

The Council will retain its statutory duty to provide land for allotments. It will therefore be the ultimate landlord for this land. However, its role will not be restricted to being a higher authority, but instead, it will participate in the governance of the Alliance through its nomination of two Directors to its Board. The functions and responsibilities of the Council are as follows:

#### **9.3.1 Governance**

- Nomination of Council reps to Allotments Alliance
- Ultimate responsibility for allotments service standards and legal compliance
- Ultimate step-in/rescue powers if self-management body failing

#### **9.3.2 Provision of allotment land**

- Lease all Council allotment land to Allotments Alliance.
- Consider requests to provide new land, or to take back surplus land from Alliance
- Acquire or appropriate land for new allotments as required
- Manage any surplus land surrendered by Alliance, noting that grazing income may need to be passed back to Alliance to support their activities
- Apply to Secretary of State for permission to dispose of surplus allotment land

#### **9.3.3 Finance, insurance and staffing**

- Manage capital reserves from sale of allotment land in accordance with Allotments Acts
- Allocate capital funding to support site improvement projects or to acquire new land for allotments
- Receive reports from Alliance on use of capital funding, including achievement of agreed outcomes, leverage of match funding etc.
- Advise on level of insurance required by self-management bodies
- Supply TUPE information if these regulations apply to any staff to be taken on by the Alliance

#### **9.3.4 Site Improvement and Maintenance**

- Process applications from Alliance for capital funding to support site improvement projects
- Provide technical advice on tree safety, invasive species, flooding and hazardous waste, as requested by Allotments Alliance



## 10. Financial Projections

See Appendix 1 for our 2023 financial statement.

See Appendix 2 for our provisional financial forecasts for 2024, 2025 and 2026.

### 10.1 Assumptions

The financial assumptions are that occupancy will increase slightly for 2024 due to the clearance work of plots. The price per square metre was raised by 5% for 2024 with a suggestion of future increases up to 5%, only if necessary. The clearing of unlettable plots will continue.

### 10.2 Investment Sources

The Alliance has investigated revenue streams from funding and is eligible to apply for Ward funds and other providers. This information has been provided by South Yorkshire Funding Advice Bureau.

### 10.3 Break-Even Forecast

See Appendix 1 and 2.

### 10.4 Specific Financial Indicators

Occupancy levels.

% of rents received.

### 10.5 Contingency Arrangements

The Alliance-allocated a £10,000 contingency allowance.



## 11. Risk Analysis

### 11.1 SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
Proven track record of successful site self-management in Rotherham	Information passed on from authority is inaccurate or omitted completely
Political support for the new management model	Limited capacity/understanding of self-management on directly managed sites
Existing administrative systems transferred to new management operations easily	The poor condition of some sites due to neglect, particularly directly managed sites
RMBC willingness to support the transition to the new model	Restrictive lease agreement from RMBC
The website and Social Media presence are operational	The quality of currently provided groundworks service has been substandard
Capability and organizational skills of Allotment Support Officer	Day-to-day operation in the long-term absence of the ASO
Dedicated input from directors	
Opportunities	Threats
Charitable CBS is well-placed to seek external funding	Possible difficulty recruiting and retaining volunteers as Directors
Scope to seek more cost-effective operational solutions	Lack of necessary expertise among volunteers
Volunteer resource and enthusiasm amongst allotment plot-holders	Inability to form Allotment Societies for individual sites
Adopt alternative/modern vision – i.e. market as 'Urban Gardening' to attract younger / different socio-economic group participants	Refusal of existing Allotment Societies to participate in the Alliance model
Utilize other social media outlets to promote the allotments and allotment gardening	Poor performance by new body
	Insufficient funds/insolvency
	Improper conduct by Directors etc



## 11.2 Risk Mitigation

Weaknesses and threats	Action to take
Ability to retain and quickly fill any arising vacancy for the post of ASO	Enact the recruitment process quickly and effectively.
Limited capacity/ understanding of self-management on directly managed sites, leading to the inability to form site societies	Alliance to manage sites where a society does not exist. Alliance supports and builds capacity where needed to form a new society. Possible formation of multi-site societies where individual sites are too small to sustain them.
Lack of necessary expertise amongst Volunteers and issues surrounding society-managed sites having difficulties recruiting and maintaining a volunteer base for society-management	Professional advice on legal and other specialist matters is available to members of the National Allotment Society and from bodies such as Co-operatives UK. Training of selected volunteers and any staff employed by the Allotments Alliance is advisable, as this will equip them to provide support to and mentor other volunteers across all sites as needed.
The poor condition of some directly managed sites and insufficient funds to address liabilities	It is expected that the Alliance and site societies will be in a strong position to develop successful bids for grant funding. Not only are they able to access funding not available to the Council, but the energy and enthusiasm of volunteers with good local knowledge will also be invaluable in making the case for funding. The Council made £100k capital available to the Alliance, and this was used to fund the most urgent improvement works. (Perhaps this last sentence should now be deleted?)
Possible difficulty recruiting and retaining volunteers as Directors	Ensure support is available where necessary to help inspire potential volunteers, promote volunteering opportunities, deal with any problems that may occur, and build volunteer leadership skills. Support may be sought from organisations such as Voluntary Action Rotherham, and the National Allotment Society.
Refusal of existing Allotment Societies to participate in the Alliance model.	The Council would explain that it will no longer lease sites directly to Societies. Thus, collected by all Societies would be passed on to the Allotments Alliance to allow it to operate. Societies and their members would be able to influence how the Alliance spends its budget. Should a Society be unwilling to work in this way, then its lease on the site would be terminated and the Alliance would control the site directly, pending the formation of a new society if possible.
Poor performance by the body	By agreeing on a set of performance indicators and putting in place a monitoring system, the Allotments Alliance would be able to identify any Societies that appear to have difficulty maintaining standards and provide the support necessary.



	Ultimately, the Alliance could terminate a Society's lease and take over control of the site if all else fails. The Alliance would also need to monitor and report its performance and act if this falls below the standards agreed upon by its membership.
Improper conduct by people within self-management bodies	A comprehensive code of conduct must be in place for volunteers and staff working within the Allotments Alliance, and the Alliance must put in place effective measures for monitoring and enforcing this, including a whistle-blowing policy. Independent auditing of accounts will help to identify any irregularities.
Financial insolvency	Proper accounting and cost-control measures will reduce the risk of running out of money. Over time, it is recommended that the Alliance builds up reserves that can be drawn upon in times of need.
Long-term ASO absence arising from sickness or vacancy	Holiday/sickness/recruitment absence will be covered by specific Directors taking responsibility for individual duties. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Email</li> <li>• Collection of post from PO box</li> <li>• Telephone</li> <li>• Plot allocations on directly managed sites-</li> <li>• Financial issues raising orders and paying invoices.</li> <li>• Enact the recruitment process quickly and effectively.</li> </ul>

### 11.3 Contingency Plans and Exit Strategy

What could possibly go wrong?	What would we do if it did?
The Alliance looks to wind itself up due to failure to manage any of the above risks	The Council will be represented on the board of the Alliance and will do all it can to help avert this. If it is unable to, then the Council will have to resume control of allotments in accordance with its statutory duties under the Allotments Acts.





## 12. Summary

The last twelve months have been a difficult period for the Alliance with the changeover of ASO taking longer than anticipated, which put great pressure on the Directors to maintain day-to-day operations, especially concerning directly managed sites. This had a knock-on effect, in that the Board had intended to undertake more of a strategic role, look at funding opportunities and develop an agenda for future improvement work and development across all sites. Having now filled the ASO position it is hoped that the Board can now progress this work during the forthcoming years. With strategic use of the revenue from rents, applied skills and knowledge from Board members and advice from governing bodies, the Alliance will be able to offer continued improvement of the allotment provision in the Rotherham area.

Health and Safety, the clearing of remaining unlettable plots and removing historic waste will be a continuing priority, sourcing outside funding where required for specific projects. The education and encouragement of good gardening practices will be focused on, with regular inspections ensuring that tenants are working their plots effectively.

The strengthening of the relationship between the RAA, societies and tenants will continue with the bi-annual society forum and shareholder meetings and information and advice will be shared where appropriate.

The ASO remains to be a point of contact for all current and future tenants and will be responsible for promoting the sustainability of the allotment provision for future generations.



[Appendix 1 2023 Financial Report](#)

[Appendix 2 2024/2025/2026 Budget Projections](#)