**Brighton and Hove Allotments Federation**

**Allotment Forum and Site Reps Meeting**

Wednesday 22nd January 2020, Patcham Community Centre, BN1 8TA

**Minutes**

**Attendance:**

30 BHAF Members

Bruce Riach, Allotments Officer, invited guest

1. **“Grow a row” for the Real Junk Food Project**

Tony from the Real Junk Food Project came to speak to us about the Project, which collects surplus food from local supermarkets and other outlets and cooks it up at several café sites around the city. They collect 10 tonnes of food every month and serve around 500 people on a “Pay as you feel” basis. The work is all done by volunteers. They are always on the lookout for new sources of food and have been thinking about how allotment holders might be able to help with donating spare produce. They have come up with the slogan “Grow a row” for the project as a way of engaging allotment holders.

People expressed support for the initiative. The main issue is collection and drop off. The ideal for them is for produce to be dropped at the project’s Hub in Bevendean from where it is distributed to the cafés. But one option is for it to be delivered to the cafés themselves. They are taking over the former Infinity café in Gardner Street and that could be a more convenient drop off point.

Vic Borrill, from the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership, is putting together some information which will be shared with BHAF members. The most efficient way would be to organise it through site associations or groups of plot holders. It was mentioned that Moulsecoomb already has an established pick up point on Saturdays. We will circulate the names and locations of the cafés and drop off points.

1. **Site Rep Elections Process – BHAF proposal**

Mark, the Chair of BHAF, explained the background to this.

Actual elections (where there are more nominations that site rep positions) will be very rare. It is difficult enough getting enough Site Reps anyway. However seeing as the Site Rep is the plot holders representative the strategy requires that there be an election process for them.

Currently, there is no agreed procedure for electing site reps. Under the Allotments Strategy, this is the joint responsibility of the Allotments Office and BHAF. The previous, piecemeal approach has not worked well. BHAF is particularly concerned to ensure that site rep elections are – and are seen to be – democratic and accountable and that everyone who might be interested gets a chance to put themselves forward. There have been issues with site rep positions seemingly being monopolised by particular cliques or seen as a personal dispensation of the Allotments Office.

At the same time, the process needs to be as simple and low cost as possible and not involve the Allotments Office in a lot of extra work. Previous consultations with plot holders and associations have shown support for having one system across all sites. BHAF’s proposal is to send out a request for any new nominations with the annual rent demand to take advantage of an existing bureaucratic mechanism. This would alert everyone to the fact that they could stand if they wished or confirm the existing postholder. If there is more than one nomination, BHAF is prepared to manage the process – asking candidates for a paragraph about themselves which would be circulated to all site plot holders. Voting would be mainly electronic. The only extra work for the allotments office would be to communicate with those who do not have email addresses. It is anticipated that very few elections would result in any one round as there is rarely more than one person offering to take on the post. BHAF is now consulting its membership on this proposal.

Issues raised:

* What happens when someone steps down midway? The proposal is for an acting site rep to be appointed by BHAF/Allotments Office and for them to be either confirmed or take part on a site-specific election at the next round, if there are any other candidates.
* How often should the site rep elections process take place? Some speakers favoured every three years. Others felt this was too long. There are arguments for and against holding it every one, two or three years.
* Should co-workers get a vote or should it be per plot? People generally favoured one vote per plot. Co-workers and the plot holder should agree together who to vote for.
* Why can’t associations manage their own site elections? It was noted that associations are private members’ groups and the actual membership on sites only averages about 10-20% of plot holders. Some site associations also have members who are not plot holders. They also have to pay to be an association member, and associations can’t force everyone to join. Allotment associations do not have the contact details of all the plot holders at their site, only their members. BHAF fully supports Allotment Associations and has helped form 3 new ones recently, however we don’t feel they are best placed to organise the elections of the sites reps.
* Bruce Riach (allotment officer) raised numerous objections to the proposal.

Mark Carroll tried to make clear that this meeting was intended for BHAF members to come together and agree a proposal which we could then take to the Council however Bruce continued to raise objections.

* Bruce opposed the proposal on the grounds that it would take too much extra work for the service if the letter goes out at the same time as the annual rent demands.
Mark Carroll suggested that this would not entail any extra work for the allotment service. The letters are automatically folded and processed by a machine, the letter would ask for all communications regarding elections to go to BHAF. No actual elections would happen until the spring anyway. This letter would just be a callout for nominations. The proposal is intended to take work away from the allotment service.

It was suggested that – if it really was the case (that it could increase the workload of the allotment service at a bus time of year) – then the letters could go out at a different time of the year anyway (though this would incur extra postal costs).

Mark pointed out that the main aim of the proposal was that it should be the least expensive and least time consuming option. Piggy backing the annual invoice mailout would mean it cost nothing and every plot holder was notified. Mailing everyone independent of the annual invoicing may have a cost of nearly £1000

Bruce also expressed a strong view that the proposed procedure could create ‘all kinds of

problems’ unless it could be tested on one site first. However, no-one could see how it could be trialled in this way. The whole point of the proposal was for a city wide process. Generally, speakers noted that the site rep system worked fine on most sites. There were problems only in a very few cases.

* Bruce also expressed his view that the Council needed to 'control' the elections. Mark said the strategy requires that we move away from the old system where the Council appointed Site Reps. We should work together on a system that is as open, democratic and accessible as possible and able to access the most diverse set of volunteers.

The proposal was put to a show of hands and passed with a large majority. This will now go forward to the AGM in April. It was agreed that two key issues – the timeframe for any new nominations and whether co-workers should also have a vote – should be further discussed at the AGM. If approved, it will go the Allotments Office for their input.

1. **The problem of unused plots**

This issue was raised on the BHAF group Facebook Page by someone concerned about overgrown plots that seemed to be vacant for long periods. The following points were made:

There is perhaps less interest in allotments generally at the moment. Some plots can be hard to fill.

People take them on and then lose interest, not realising how much work an allotment takes.

Some so-called empty plots are not actually vacant and there can be many reasons for this, including long term ill health, people struggling to manage because of the loss of a co-worker.

Waiting lists need to be handled dynamically, for instance by offering co-worker arrangements to people on the list.

At Roedale Valley, when a plot become vacant, the site reps write ahead to the first ten on the waiting list to let them know.

Bruce said that there are currently 196 plots vacant across the city. The office has got some new admin support in to go through the waiting lists.

A suggestion was made to have a forum for co-workers. This can be done by putting a section for them on the Facebook page or the Website.

1. **Site Rep Support Group**

There have been requests for informal mentoring and support from site reps. Amos (site rep at Roedale Valley) is the BHAF site reps liaison officer. He is setting up regular check-in sessions on Saturday mornings and will be in contact with site reps with further information on these.

The meeting concluded at 8.45 pm.