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Minutes  
BHAF Committee Meeting,**

**7 pm 11th May 2021**

**Via Zoom**

Present:

Mark Carroll (Chair)

Hilary Standing (Secretary)

Hannes Froehlich (Treasurer)

Josephina Salamone (Tenants’ Liaison Officer)

Andrew Amos (Site Reps Liaison Officer)

Vicki Williams

Maude Casey

Nick Fry

Angela Jane Swinn

Allan Brown

Simon Powell (Ecology Adviser)

1. **Welcome, apologies and introductions for new members**

The whole committee was present so there were no apologies. Allan was welcomed back after his period of leave. New members Maude Casey (Moulsecoomb) and Nick Fry (Craven Vale) were warmly welcomed onto the committee.

1. **Minutes of the last meeting (27.11.2019) and matters arising**

The committee reviewed the minutes and noted there were continuing issues with communications from the Allotments Service. Following representations from BHAF and discussions with senior management in City Parks, and then a resolution at the Council’s last Environment, Transport and Sustainability Committee meeting, the Council has now recruited someone to produce an operational plan for delivering the Allotments Strategy. This will form part of the revised Open Spaces Strategy for the city. The Allotments Strategy was originally signed off by the Council in 2014. Since then, there has been little progress in putting it into practice on the Council’s part. This person will be working full time, starting 24th May. Enquiries will be made re the terms of reference and job description for this post.

Following agreement at the last meeting to find ways of improving communications to BHAF members, a new private Facebook group was set up. This has been very successful and is also attracting people on the waiting list.

The Minutes were approved.

1. **Chair’s report**

Mark noted the continuation of poor to non-existent communication during the COVID lockdowns between the Allotments Service and BHAF, site reps and associations. Emails are either going unanswered, or taking a long time to receive a reply (the specified time of ten working days is often not met). No information has been forthcoming on changes in the way site lettings are being managed, or on when and whether inspections will take place. We understand the Allotments Service is trialling remote lettings but we have been given no information on how this is working and how many sites have been let in this way. There appears to be no line management within the allotments service. We are now having to communicate issues with the service through Rachel Chasseaud, one of City Parks’ Assistant Directors.

On the plus side, there is a new part time administrator in the allotments office attempting to deal with the back log of admin tasks. A recent email from her to a tenant was cited as an example of constructive and positive communication. It is hoped that she will stay in post.

We now have the highest number of people on the waiting list for an allotment in many years. Earlier, there had been an effort to cull the names of people who were no longer looking for an allotment. This had reduced the numbers to a manageable level. But since the start of COVID-19, the waiting list has ballooned to well over 2000. Simon commented that Whitehawk Hill and Craven Vale sites were expanded in 2010 to cater to rising numbers then. But this is unlikely to happen now. People are also now paying £17 to join a waiting list. BHAF is very uncomfortable about this as they may be waiting years for a plot and it is arguable that they should be refunded. Note, the Council’s website currently says: *Due to a combination of changes to work practices and ongoing council IT issues, we are unable to process your allotment application at this time.*

1. **Treasurer’s report and Development Fund applications**

Hannes noted that we have had very low committee expenses over the last year due to lack of activity and meetings. The main cost has been hiring an accountant to check our financial accounts. We thus have a healthy balance and welcome any appropriate proposals for projects that advance the interests of plot holders. Mark commented that it is important to keep a good size buffer in case of an emergency.

Around half of the development fund has been spent so far. For the 2020/2021 financial year

Expenditure is as follows:

* Material for steps to shop - St Louie            £62
* Guttering & water storage – Keston            £230
* Trestle tables – Craven Vale/Whitehawk Hill        £141
* Doors for storage hut and store – Roedale Valley     £1340
* Outdoor oven (community kitchen) – Weald        £725
* Notice boards – Craven Vale/Whitehawk Hill        £487

                                                                             Total **£*2985***

Further applications are welcomed. The committee reiterated the rules for what is acceptable to be bought for sites. The expenditure must benefit the site and plot holders, as a whole. Individual pieces of equipment, such as strimmers, are not suitable for funding. They can go missing, or break – and are then not repaired.

1. **Update on and implications of recent meeting with Council GDPR team on their refusal to provide contact details to BHAF and site reps.**

Mark and Hilary had a remote meeting with Rachel Chasseaud and Robert Walker (City Parks) and Hina Khan (Information Governance Team) to discuss the Council’s recent stance on GDPR regulations. They will no longer provide BHAF with contact details for plot holders, despite the fact that they are automatically members of BHAF and a levy on everyone’s rent is paid annually to BHAF. They will also no longer provide site reps with contact details of individuals on the waiting list to enable them to carry out lettings of vacant sites.

The Council has enforced a blanket ban on any individual contact details being supplied to any independent organisation regardless of the fact that their volunteers do essential work for the Council. This appears to be an extreme form of risk aversion. Some Councils have been fined for poor GDPR practice. Instead of tightening up their own lax procedures, the Council has opted to go for an expensive and unworkable ban. It means paying additional admin staff to fill the gaps. The Allotment Service will now have to set up meetings on site.

We consulted our GDPR expert and BHAF member Milda Liuolyte. She gave us her considered view that this blanket ban is a misuse and misinterpretation of GDPR by the Council. We have always had that arrangement in the past and it has apparently been in accordance with GDPR until now.

The consensus view in the committee is that we need to keep pushing on this and also raise issues such as how much extra is this costing the Council? We should also consider getting together with other associations who are experiencing the same problem.

Mark has also been in contact with the national allotments association. They are aware of this issue and have responded that the picture is variable across sites nationally, depending on the type of relation between councils and allotments associations. They have sent some helpful information on what is happening in other places, including a form of wording used by Bristol Council to allow release of contact details. This has been forwarded to Rachel Chasseaud.

In relation to the refusal to give out our members’ details, we need to supply wording to the Council to get them to send out an email to ask tenants to send their contact details to us. We could also put leaflets in a box at sites asking people if they want to sign up to BHAF and to send us their contact details. We have been able to sign up more tenants through the Facebook group.

It was agreed that the situation is particularly serious in relation to the non-release of information to site reps. In effect, this destroys the long-standing and effective arrangements that have always been in place for site lettings on allotments. It raises some critical questions. What about the vacancy lists that site reps already have? Site reps are already getting lists of plots that may be vacant. Are they allowed to use their existing lists and let plots? Will site reps still be given their plots for free even under the new regime? How big is the problem of getting plots back in cultivation? If site reps let out plots, then the allotment officer comes along and lets them himself through remote lettings it will be a recipe for confusion.

Mark has emailed site reps to get some feedback on whether they have received information from the Allotments Officer, what they know about what is going on, whether they have seen any remote letting taking place or know about the recent ban on being given waiting list applicants’ details. Site reps are already responding saying they have heard nothing.

Committee members mentioned they have had reports that transfers across sites from other plots are taking place and that lettings are going ahead to existing plot holders wanting to extend their half plots to full plots. The question was raised as to whether this is acceptable when there is a huge waiting list. However, the Allotments Strategy does allow for full plot lettings. But it was noted that there is a hierarchy of lettings and people on the waiting list tend to be last. Clarification on how the rules are being applied is urgently needed.

Despite several requests for information on current lettings policy, we are still in the dark about it. it We should consider submitting a Freedom of Information request on this. We should also persevere in trying to get some mediation in place with the AS service. We need to look for any other leverage we can. It is hoped the new appointment who will work on the Allotments Strategy will be helpful on this.

1. **Moving forward on the Allotments Strategy**

It was agreed that we should set up a Strategy Liaison Group drawn from the existing committee to work with the new appointee and other Council officials to represent BHAF in any negotiations over the strategy delivery plan. This Group will report back to the BHAF committee on a regular basis. Group membership:

Mark Carroll (Chair)

Hilary Standing (Secretary)

Vicki Williams

Nick Fry

1. **Date of next meeting**

To be decided

1. **AOB**

Simon raised a question about site access and whether access improvements to poorly surfaced tracks could be approved for support from the development fund. The general view was that it is a Council responsibility to maintain access ways but Nick suggested a joint approach to the Council about this.

Vicki reported that she attended a workshop led by the University of Sussex on the benefits of food growing and being outside during COVID. She said it was an interesting, if slightly disorganised meeting. Five people attended. We hope to have something to put out on BHAF social media and send to allotment associations, once the process is complete.

There was a short discussion about whether people now understand better the role and status of BHAF as an independent tenant representative organisation, as a result of the information on the new Facebook group. It was agreed that should be undertaken to improve the public understanding of  who BHAF is and what we do.

The meeting closed at 8.45 pm.