



Brighton & Hove Allotment Federation

Is the allotment service broken?

Feb 2024

Cuts to local councils' budgets have decimated many public services. But at last year's AGM the council assured us the allotment service was back to full strength and that the historic issues would now be addressed. A year later and sadly things have gone from bad to worse.

**The allotment service has not completed full inspections at any site for at least the past 2 years*.
(Possibly 4 years if we include Covid lockdowns)**

**As a result the allotment service hasn't evicted a single tenant for not looking after their plot for *at least* 2 years*.
Many plots are now overgrown and unused.**

The waiting list is at its longest ever (3000+) with people still signing up and paying £18 to join it.

Plot vacancies are at their highest level for 10 years despite the demand being at an all-time high.

Site Reps are being told they can't let plots despite there being vacant plots ready to go.

Site Reps morale is at an all-time low. They complain of lack of support and training.

The 10-year Allotment Strategy has now finished with only 7 of the 83 recommendations completed*.

Hundreds of trees are growing on plots and some sites are reverting to woodland.

Fences, gates and haulage ways are not being maintained.

Emails are not being answered impacting Site Reps and tenants.

Last year all the bills were months late with some people waiting over 9 months to be billed.

*Data from council reports to the allotment oversight board.

All of this paints a picture of a service which is now failing badly.

We all know of the multitude of benefits that allotments bring. Along with improving food security for those on low incomes, they also bring huge benefits for peoples' physical and mental health, bio diversity and the wider environment. But did you know that well run allotments would also bring a large financial benefit to the City.

[£385,000 of benefits the Allotments bring to the city.](#)

So why at a time when the demand for allotments is at an all-time high. and when the benefits they could bring are at a peak, why is the allotment service operating at an all-time low?

We are aware of the extremely difficult financial position the council finds itself in, but we do not feel that any major investment is needed to get the service working. According to the council the service has been fully staffed since early last year. The service needs proper dedicated management oversight and revised practices. Getting the allotments service working optimally will unlock benefits, especially to those on lower incomes who need all the support they can get at the moment. Sadly, the time has come to sound the alarm.

We look forward to hearing from senior Council Officers on how they propose to rehabilitate the service, address the failure to implement the Allotment Strategy and work with BHAF, site reps and tenants to create allotment sites that we can all be proud of.

For details, please visit our website <https://www.bhaf.org.uk/content/about/issues/is-the-allotment-service-broken>

Site Reps

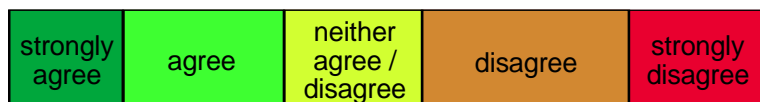
Site Reps are the backbone of the allotment community. Without the volunteer Site Reps, the council would not be able to manage the service. Site reps carry out inspections, they let plots and they address local site issues. Site Rep morale is at an all-time low. They report feeling isolated and unsupported and unable to do their job. Some have resigned already and we have heard that more resignations are coming.

(BHCC and BHAF) surveyed Site Reps in spring and autumn of last year 2023

https://www.bhaf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/FullSiteRepSurvey_Oct2023.pdf

These are the results to the statement; 'The council has given me the support I need to do my job effectively'

Spring 2023 %



Autumn 2023 %



Example comments from the survey;

"The new system doesn't work.... I don't get any replies at all now."

"The 10 days reply period is a thing of the past. Some emails are never answered. I now only write to the AO if I want to create a paper trail, I don't expect to receive a reply."

"I'm still waiting for answers to emails from about 2 years ago!"

"We carried out inspections, but had no follow up support from the Allotments Office. Those plots are now worse, and no one has received any further notices. We will never get the waiting list down if you don't help us to move on plot holders who have abandoned their plots"

In addition to the BHAF/BHCC Site Rep survey an internal council report on Site Reps has also come to the Allotment Oversight Board. It identified;

- 2.1 Lack of clarity around Site Rep role and responsibilities
- 2.2 Lack of recognition for the contribution made by Site Reps, relative to other BHCC volunteers
- 2.3 Lack of Inductions for New Site Reps
- 2.4 Lack of Training Opportunities for Site Reps

There has been no Site Rep training for a number of years. Site Rep meetings used to take place every few months. However, the last one was over 15 months ago. A number of Site Reps have resigned. There are volunteers offering to take their place but have been told that the allotment service does not have the capacity to induct them. So currently a number of sites do not have Site Reps.

Inspection and evictions of unused plots.

Inspections are crucial in maintaining the allotment service. With 3000 people waiting Plot holders whose plots are unused and overgrown need to be evicted. Overgrown plots are also a bane for their neighbours as weeds encroach and their seeds are blown onto well-kept plots.

Overgrown and unused plots were already an issue when the strategy began in 2014. BHAF highlighted the problem again in 2021.

[Overgrown and unused plots BHAF Facebook page](#)

<https://www.brightonandhovenews.org/2021/07/17/council-grows-allotment-waiting-list-and-blames-data-protection-rules/>

The first inspection is done by the Site Rep. The second and third inspections need to be made with an inspection officer from the council.

Due to frustrations reported from Site Reps about the lack of completed inspections over the last few years some 'inspection pilots' were done in 2022 and 2023 by 'Project Services' (who are not part of the allotment service) in order to look at how the process was being managed.

An excerpt of the Project Board's pilot approach, agreed with the Allotment Service before the project started, states:

8/ Pilot Monitoring Process

1. *During the Inspection Pilot, Project Services will commit to undertaking inspections in line with the above guidance at Moulsecoomb, The Weald, Roedale Valley, Keston, Patcham Court Farm and Horsdean.*

The Allotment Service will commit to doing the same at the remaining sites.

2. *After each inspection window, Project Services and the Allotment Service will provide the Pilot Board with a report detailing:*
 - a) *the dates inspections were carried out,*
 - b) *the named individuals completing the inspections,*
 - c) *the numbers of and reasons for notices issued, and*
 - d) *numbers of and general rationales for any plots that would ordinarily have received notices if not for mitigating circumstances*

Sadly, this commitment was broken. We have seen the 'pilot inspections report'

The pilot report shows the allotment service only completed 12 of 56 summer and autumn inspections in 2023. Requested data shows only 12 of 52 were completed in 2022, with no evictions in either year for people not looking after their plots.

<https://www.bhaf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Full-2022-Inspection-Record.docx>

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It can be seen from the data tables linked above that the inspections by 'Project Services' (pilot inspections) were all carried out properly (1st, 2nd and 3rd inspections all took place) This resulted in 70 terminations.

In contrast the inspections that were supposed to be carried out by the regular allotment service were not completed properly in either year. There were no terminations in either year.

Plot Lettings Problems and Lost Revenue

In the last 10 years the average vacancy rate has been about 8% and never higher than 10. As it stands today the number of vacant plots is at nearly 12%. We estimate that the total value of unlet plots to be just over £21,000 a year

“Unlettable” plots (too overgrown to let) which equate to an area of just over 36 full size plots are losing the service £4,140 a year.

This means that vacancies and unlettable plots are estimated to be costing the service £25,000 a year in lost revenue. (Last year a large rent increase (£25 per plot) was introduced).

Site reps used to be able to manage letting plots on their site themselves. However, changes in the way the council has interpreted the GDPR regulation means that Site reps are no longer given the names and contact details of people waiting for plots at their site. This has caused immense frustration among Site Reps. The council *could* legally give Site reps contact details of potential plot holders as this is a legitimate use of the contact details. However, the council has taken a very risk averse position in this regard. To get around the GDPR issue the allotment service itself now arranges letting events itself. These do not happen often enough as far as many Site reps are concerned. They see plots falling into worsening states and are unable to let them.

Plots are remaining vacant and unlet at the same time that the council is claiming the service is not making enough money and raising rents and asking for voluntary donations.

One Site Rep said on the survey;

“I have had no vacancy lists/ letting events for >6 months. I appreciate that the situation is worse on other sites and they are being given priority. However, it is very frustrating and disappointing not to be able to let plots considering how many people are on the waiting list”

another said

“None of vacant plots let in recent months - last letting was in early February 2023.”

one told me

“Volunteers trimmed and cleared some plots ready for letting back in the early summer. I asked to let them but was told not to but to wait for a council arranged letting event. Those plots are now all overgrown again”

another said;

“I used to be able keep it (the site) pretty nearly fully occupied, no chance of that now.”

Trees

The council's own rules state that trees must not be allowed to grow on allotments. This rule has not been enforced for so long that some sites are reverting to woodland. Every year that goes by without this being addressed dramatically increases the cost of sorting it out. There are now so many trees growing on one site (Roedale Valley) that the Council now needs permission from the Forestry Commission to chop them down!

<https://www.bhaf.org.uk/content/about/issues/the-problem-of-trees-on-allotments>

Haulage ways

As well as the trees issue, we've had quite a few messages about the state of the allotment haulage ways, some are so overgrown and full of holes that it's no longer possible to access plots in a vehicle. This is an issue especially for emergency vehicles like ambulances. Site Reps have been told that it's the plot holders who need to maintain them but the rules say otherwise.

From the rule book.

20. The Council's Responsibilities

20.2 Repairs and Maintenance

Repairs to the site perimeter fences, gates and water infrastructure; maintenance of haulage ways; vacant plot management; hedges and tree management.

4.2 Where hedges abut a perimeter boundary, road or vehicular haulage way, the council is responsible for maintaining the outside and top.

19.10 Haulage way: A common route within the site for vehicular and pedestrian access to allotments.

The degradation of haulage ways is another serious concern.

Allotment Strategy 2014-2024

In 2014 the Council and BHAF jointly produced a 10-year strategy to improve allotments. That strategy has now run its course and sadly the allotments are in a much worse place in 2024 than they were at the start of the strategy in 2014.

We were warning that the Allotment Strategy was not getting delivered four years ago;

<https://www.bhaf.org.uk/content/about/issues/2020-december-newsletter>

A council review of recommendation delivery (Feb 2024) shows

Delivered (7 (of 83 recommendations))

Scoping Commenced (14)

No Progress (42)

not applicable (8)

Delivered in Part (7)

Ongoing (3)

with this caveat;

"The numbers of recommendations falling into each category do not, in isolation, provide a basis for quantifying the extent of progress in delivering the Strategy, as a/ recommendations vary in their potential impact (ranging from the relatively trivial to critical), and b/ many recommendations are variations on a single theme."

However, even taking into account this caveat the actual data is even worse. BHAF is responsible for 3 of the delivered recommendations. Of the 4 recommendations delivered by the council, one was the introduction of the charge (now £18) to join the waiting list. Another is to address water leaks. (which is arguably a basic job of running the service)

5 of the recommendations in 'scoping commenced' relate to improving site rep experience. The review concluded that site rep experience has actually got worse.

Community, participation and volunteering were key principles in the strategy. None of the 'community enhancement' recommendations relating to participation, waiting list involvement, co-working, training, volunteering and community groups have been delivered.