

BHAF AGM Minutes 25th March 2024

Welcome

Introductions: councillors and BHAF committee members

Special thank you to BHCC Councillors and directors for attending:

- Cllr Tim Rowkins – Chair, City Environment, South Downs & The Sea Committee
- Theresa Fowler – Deputy Chair, City Environment, South Downs & The Sea Committee
- Chenine Bhatena - Assistant Director of Culture, Tourism and Sport
- Rob Walker – Manager, City Parks (Rob has come to these meetings for a number of years)
- Cllr Mitchie Alexander – City Environment, South Downs & The Sea Committee
- Cllr Keri Pickett – Cllr Kerry Pickett - City Environment, South Downs & The Sea Committee (Opposition Spokesperson)

We'll give the council the opportunity to speak in the second half of this meeting.

Minutes of last meeting

The minutes have been on the website for a year, with no agenda requests, so taken as accepted.

Chair's report

Since last year's meeting we've lost a local allotment hero - Alan Philips of The Weald allotment site, Seedy Sunday and Brighton and Hove Organic Gardeners Group – the man behind the allotment strategy. He was on the committee for a number of years. He was a dedicated allotment volunteer and inspirational man, putting in many hours over the years for the allotment and food growing service.... He always gave good advice and was a lovely person to know. He didn't speak much about his previous life, so it was quite a surprise when we saw his obituary in the Guardian, which blew us all away. He'd been an international human rights adviser; general secretary of the World University Service. He worked with governments all around the world and he notably supported students and academics in Chile who were being tortured under General Pinochet's regime. He'll be sadly missed by all who knew him, so before we move to other business I'd just like to say cheers to Alan and thanks for all he did.

You can [read his obituary here](#).

Alan was aghast as we all were when he heard that a venture capital backed private company was trying to rent land from the council to set up private allotments – this happened earlier this year. It was no accident that Roots chose Brighton & Hove... they'd clearly been studying where allotment services were failing and waiting lists were the longest... they'd been targeting these areas specifically. Brighton & Hove is unfortunately one of those areas. But luckily the new administration listened to our concerns and decided to reject that application. This was very welcome, but I don't think we've heard the last of Roots.... They're now exploring private land in the area and will no doubt be pushing again: privatised allotments are still a very real threat.

One helpful development over the last year or two has been the introduction of the Allotment Oversight Board – a committee made up of members of BHAF and council officers who manage the allotment service. We've had four meetings so far. Reports and site rep surveys on how the allotment service is performing that were commissioned for the AOB have shown us some worrying data. The headlines are on the BHAF website and the second half of this meeting will focus on these specific issues.

Monitoring Site Reps' experiences over time was a key piece of insight for this board. We surveyed reps early in 2023 and again at the end of the year, to measure changes. We'd hoped to see improvement, but the data showed none and some indicators had worsened. E.g. site reps were feeling unsupported and frustrated, with over half feeling they weren't getting what they needed from the council to carry out their role; a deterioration in communication and whilst some site reps receive a quick response, over a third said this didn't happen promptly and some said they never got a reply at all.

It's also sad to see that around 40% of reps feel their contribution is not valued by the council. Other metrics have remained the same. You can read the [full report here](#). The waiting list and vacancies performance indicators are also very worrying. They show that the number of vacancies has almost doubled, compared to this time last year, demonstrating that the current lettings procedures aren't working. As some of you may know, the council no longer shares the email addresses of people at the top of the waiting list with site reps and the allotment service has been trying to arrange all lettings themselves, rather than with these site volunteers, resulting in 317 vacancies at present: 11% of all plots. The national average is normally around 8%.

The issue with site reps being unable to access email data has been cited by the council as GDPR as the rationale but we contacted a GDPR expert a while back and were told "this is probably one of worst cases of unintended effects of regulation that I've seen in a decade" They said it's perfectly legal under a 'legitimate interest' to share applicants' email addresses with site reps and even more so, when applicants tick a box to say they're happy for their email to be shared with site reps. This could be strengthened by site reps signing a data sharing agreement. Other councils are doing this. I met with BHCC's GDPR expert a year ago and she admitted that even though it was legal to share these email addresses, they wouldn't. This is an extremely risk-averse approach. Each time we point out the problems this is causing, the new IT system is quoted as the potential solution but we are two years on and it still hasn't launched, so we know this process isn't working well. Vacant plots continue to rise and it just doesn't make any sense. Site reps tell us there are many more unused plots that should be included in the figures.

The waiting list has also increased by 500 people in the last year, most paying £18.80 to join, totalling £9,400 in the year.

Treasurer's report

Not much to report.... A fairly quiet year with few expenses, consistent with previous years.

BHAF Account 2023/24



Start Balance	10830	
BHAF Expenses	-850	Includes web hosting, email facilities, zoom, posters and distribution, transport, postage
Accountant fees	-198	Account review as required by council
Meeting costs	-711	AGM and BHAF meetings in person
Council Levy	3245	Payment via Council for BHAF Running Costs
End Balance	12316	

We have reached a new low with the Development Fund – The only application has been for a mini beds project at Whitehawk Hill/Craven Vale. This compares to a few years ago with lots of ideas and new funding allocated. But as site reps have focused on the allotment service not working, this development work has suffered.

Dev Fund Report 2023/24



This year we spent only 13% of the allocated development funds (£6000) for site developments across Brighton and Hove

– Mini bed scheme – CravenVale/Whitehawk (£800.00)
Total **£800**

We do have funds – so if you have a community-based project you'd like BHAF to support financially, please apply! [More information on that here.](#)

BHAF Committee elections

We've lost two committee members this year. We'd like to thank Vic Woodcock-Downey and Josephina Salamone – they've both had to step down for health reasons. Josephina in particular has supported a lot of tenants and done some great work as a site rep, so it's sad to see her go, but she may return in the future.

No new nominations, so I'd like to suggest we agree the committee as it stands in one vote:

Chair: Mark Carroll
Treasurer: Hannes Froelich
Acting Secretary : Gabriella Harman

Committee members:
 Hilary Standing
 Andrew Amos
 Matt Williams
 Liz Wakefield
 Maude Casey
 Ronnie Mair

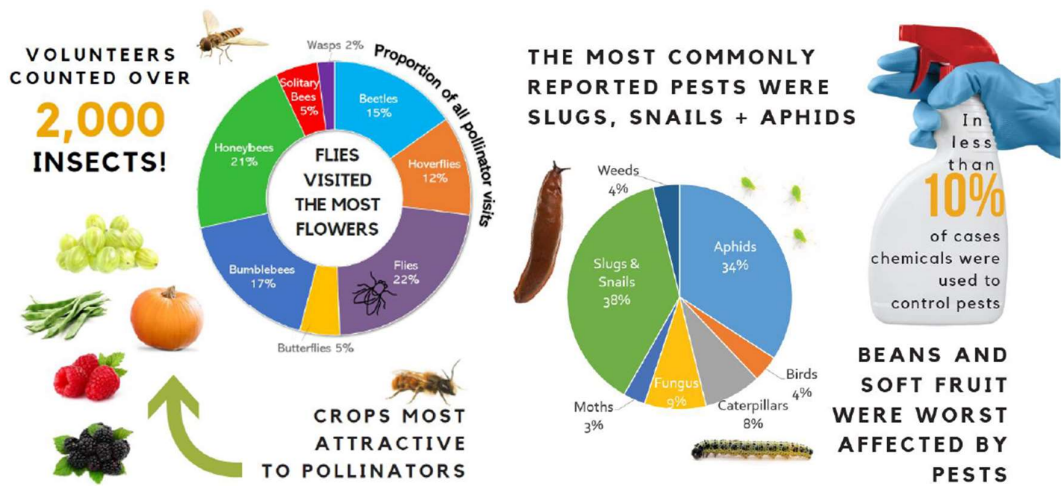
Majority vote: yes. No votes against. One abstention.

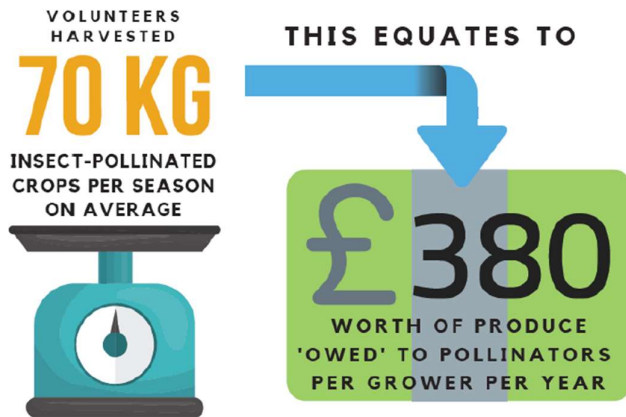
Allotment Biodiversity in Brighton & Hove: project summary – Dr Beth Nicholls & Leah Salm, University of Sussex

Back in 2017 I (Beth) first attended a meeting to ask allotment holders to help with our research. I'd like to thank Alan Phillips in particular who was so helpful in setting up the project at The Weald.

Progress report:

- Original project – collecting data on biodiversity of allotments and productivity of allotments
- Training delivered on allotment pollinators.
- People kept a 'grow your own' diary.
- Lots of sign up for the project – great enthusiasm
- Very interesting data: We don't know much about the biodiversity of city projects, but we captured data on over 2,000 insects and we identified the most attractive products to pollinators.
- 70kg of produce harvested – insect pollinated crops per season on average, valued at £380 per grower.
- The majority of growers aren't using chemical pesticides or fertilisers.
- It led to three publications – shared with scientific community but has contributed to national discourse on the value of allotments.
- Press coverage included an article in the Guardian and World at One, plus other podcasts.





How to get involved in new projects: plans for 2024

- Bitesize Biodiversity- sign up now! Capturing food growers' stories of food biodiversity in Brighton & Hove
- Perennial Crops in Urban Agriculture- perceptions of growers and benefits for biodiversity
- Biodiversity Monitoring in Brighton Allotments

Contact Leah for more information l.salm@greenwich.ac.uk



Review of the allotment strategy

In 2014 councillors introduced a one-year strategy to get the allotment service working. The committee worked hundreds of hours to deliver a roadmap for the service, to help the council and volunteers work effectively together. What people wanted for allotments was changing and we wanted to accommodate that. Whilst some still want half and full plots, we estimate 22% of people on the waiting list wanted something smaller – microplots. If people with larger plots that were overgrown were offered a smaller plot this would address their allotment experience and free up space for more people. See quote on slides. Sadly this hasn't happened.

It became clear early on that the management didn't share the enthusiasm we had for the strategy, which had been signed off by councillors unanimously. Site reps became frustrated with the lack of progress, not surprisingly.

Review of Recommendation Delivery February 2024 (Mark Carroll)

83 recommendations in total

Delivered (7 of 83)

No Progress (42)

Scoping Commenced (14)

No longer applicable (8)

Delivered in Part (7)

Ongoing (3)

Brighton and Hove Organic Gardeners Group – based at The Weald.



BHAF

1,2,3. Provide evidence of benefits : BHAF commissioned an ‘Outline Business Case for Allotments’ study in 2021.

Delivered : 7 out of 83 : BHCC figures

10. Addressed Worst Water Leaks.

57. People on the Waiting List can now look up their position online. (and weep)

61. A three strikes and you are out policy introduced for people who refuse a plot they are offered; or if they don’t show up.

73. Introduction of a charge for joining the waiting list of £15 (Now £18.80)

No progress examples : Community

67. ‘Individual beds’ (much smaller than a full or half plot) could be offered to the 22% of people on the waiting list that would choose them.

52. Opportunities for people who want to volunteer should be established

26. Applications from community groups should be encouraged and fast-tracked.

22. Waiting list people should be kept informed about Community Plots, options for co-working and volunteer opportunities.

No progress or scoping commenced examples :

Site Rep Support

40. The Site Rep role should be supported and strengthened.

31. Opportunities for Site Reps to take part in training should be provided.

Site Rep Role descriptions should be agreed as a priority.

The Allotment Officer should play a key role in supporting Site Reps.

Site representatives should be offered opportunities to share ideas and good practice with each other, both on a practical level and activities which will help to build community.

Participation and the involvement of the allotment community should become a key principle in allotment management

Council Review of Recommendation Delivery February 2024 says;

Based on feedback, it has become clear that support and provision for Site Reps has regressed and is now well below the standards set out in the council’s volunteering policy.

Summary from Chair

- Site reps haven't received the training promised.
- When you add up the hours site reps contribute it's worth £150,000 a year.
- We need the council to treat site reps as partners – some have been there for 20 years and they really understand allotments. But they need support and communication from the council.
- A council officer was allocated to oversee the allotment service, but we need properly allocated management to contribute and manage.
- I'm fearful we're going round and round in circles. A strong and sustained political will is needed to create the change needed to stop further deterioration of the service and to restore it to the strategy agreed.

BHCC response

Chenine Bhatena - Assistant Director of Culture, Tourism and Sport, now responsible for City Parks

We're working closely with Rob on City Parks. We're sorry the strategy hasn't lived up to expectations – we're not here to make excuses. We're here to find a way to work forwards – keep what's worked. This is about partnership working. Really hope we can get beyond these problems and come up with some big ideas for the future. A review was finalised end Feb and we're still going through it with the team.

I'm inheriting a strategy that hasn't lived up to expectations and we're sorry about that.

There have been some achievements:

- Maintenance – we now have a maintenance team, which didn't exist before.
- We have let plots – lettings events (25). Important to remember what's happening as well as what's not happening. We're bringing in an ops manager to address the management gap and their main focus will be allotments for 2024.
- Also have funding for a new allotments post. Really committed to continuing to work with BHAF and hope we can find a way to put some positive steps in place.
- We don't intend to privatise. All of our councillors are committed to allotments and we really value site reps – we want to thank all of them – and let them know they are appreciated.
- We want to put training in place. Look at water and toilets on site. Let more plots.
- We're here to listen and understand priorities for incorporation into the improvement plan.
- My understanding is that our vacancy rate is 8%.
- We'll share a draft with Mark and Hillary at our next meeting. We are in the process of recruitment.
- Re GDPR we are looking at how we can work better, being creative within council protocols – all with a view to letting more plots.
- Happy to hear from you all and visit allotments – Chenine.Bhatena@brighton-hove.gov.uk

Cllr Tim Rowkins – Chair, City Environment, South Downs & The Sea Committee

It's great to be here and see such a fantastic turnout – it just goes to show how important this is. Just to echo Chenine, we're not planning on outsourcing the allotment service to Veolia or anyone else. We're lucky to have fantastic allotments around the city in great locations and we recognise the benefits of food growing and being in nature. The sense of community – illustrated by the number of people here tonight.

- Reiterate: want to say thanks to the site reps for doing their best in a very unsatisfactory situation.
- Universal acceptance the service isn't functioning as it should. We're here to listen to you and respond with a concerted focus that addresses the problems
- Agreement with Chair's comments
- Want to hear more about the problems and focus on solutions.

Questions from the floor

Q: Would it be workable/desirable to extend the 10-year strategy given we had Covid in the middle of it and can we get the council to agree to fulfil the agreed points?

Q: D – plot holder

- Can we have some honesty about why the promises have not been kept? We keep going round in circles and we'd like to hear from the council why the problems exist.
- Could the allotment service run a brief consultation on which of the 82 points unactioned from the allotment strategy?
- Could the council not get advice from a GDPR lawyer?

A: Cllr Tim Rowkins: We need to extend it or replace it so it's more focused on the core priorities. A consultation – input from plot holders is a good idea to enable us to focus on the top 10 or 20. Rob Walker agreed. Regarding GDPR it shouldn't be an insurmountable problem. We shouldn't wait for the IT system – we should get this working quicker. Rob Walker said the IT system project is not going well, so agreed we should find a solution independent of the IT project delivery.

Q: S from the Weald. Does no outsourcing mean no outsourcing at all? No charity or CIC?

A from Campsite – understanding of site reps is that don't have any site reps. Have emailed council but heard nothing.

A: Cllr Tim Rowkins: we can take this away as an action.

Q: You said no outsourcing at the beginning – can we have assurances on this? Tim: we all felt that in principle, allotments as public land shouldn't be privatised. They should be used for food growing. Point taken about political landscape. But we're about protecting it for the public good.

A: Cllr Tim Rowkins – in principle we think that allotments should be protected for the public good.

Q: In Hove – Elm Drive – there was a boxing club converted into a care home with green space allocated for allotments. It's still an empty green space. The same company now has a plan to develop on that site – another care home. This is a disgrace. Appreciate the need for elderly care given an aging population, but there's also a need for green space, growing and the balance of the structure of the town can become unbalanced, making it a poorer place to live.

A: Cllr Tim Rowkins happy to take this away and look for it.

Q: J Plot holder from Eastbrook Allotments, Portslade – people on the waiting list could be connected with people who have plots and are happy to have them help. Good experience. If we can work around GDPR I don't see why this wouldn't be possible.

Q: R – site rep. This year I've let 3 plots (site rep) with the help of the allotment service. We did a full site survey at the end of the last year – it was going well but it seems to have stalled. I have the waiting list from four years ago – could I use that to let plots and ease the waiting lists?

A: Cllr Tim Rowkins – thanks for your hard work. We'd need to ensure that people on the waiting list are happy to be contacted. It's in our interests too to get things moving. We need to take this away and find a solution.

Chenine Bhatena – I was looking at the context of why letting plots slowed & how we can enable them to be let with volunteers so it's a simpler process and this is something Letting plots can take a fair amount of admin time. I need to look at – creating a simpler process. There are reasons for things. Limited staff. We can overcome it.

Q: N – plot holder Lower Roedale. I need a co-worker – there's a need for communication around that issue. I've put word out. Site reps can communicate digitally. Our sit rep organised a whatsapp group – ordered a huge amount of manure at bulk rates. Had a knife sharpening day.

A: Chair – sounds like some great community initiatives and you've found a way to communicate.

Q: A – North Nevill – if we get the basics right quickly, what's the plan for the plots that have been left for too long and access paths that might need machinery to address the overgrowth? Does the allotment service know where these problem areas are? They're getting worse and worse.

A: Cllr Tim Rowkins: Catching up on maintenance is important. The plots have to be lettable. Given the time that has accumulated it's going to be a challenge and this is where we cross over into other areas of the service e.g. arbour service flat out on Elm Disease.

Chenine Bhatena – we just need to prioritise the ones not in a really bad state and get those let, while we review what needs to be done with the more overgrown plots. Some of these issues have been left for so long, they've become a bigger issue. We need a plan for that.

Q: T – North Nevill co-worker – entrance has parking bays that are totally illegal. We can't get deliveries. I've spoken to Highways Agency, Land Registry and Planning Board. Could we spend some of the money BHAF has to address this? E.g. a bollard or two for allotment plot holders.

A: Chair: Site-specific questions are probably best addressed outside this meeting.

Q: Person no. 127 on Waiting list: Whitehawk. On the same position for 3 years. 20 plots around me. 9 empty. Why can't co-workers be offered vacant plots first? They've proved themselves.

Q: J – site rep Whitehawk Hill. Is it two years when a co-worker can take over a plot?

A: Chair: A co-worker has to have been registered for as long as the first person on the waiting list – and be on the waiting list too. Need to adhere to the rules so no one jumps the queue.

Q: J – site rep Whitehawk Hill. It's no use 'getting creative' with GDPR. We chose to be unpaid volunteers because we care so much. I'm sick of it going round and round because of this fictitious IT system. Please do something about it.

A: Chair: I think we've already covered GDPR

Q: A – site rep – Roedale Valley – I recruited 3 site reps who are awaiting training. Where is the allotment officer?

Q: The waiting list feels like a problem the council is creating. Can people on the waiting list cancel their request? Can they get their deposit back? The waiting list is probably fictitious.... A neighbour of mine was at position 74 then 98. Now she is 75. How does this work?

Q: N – site rep, Craven Vale. We're up for collaboration but the council needs to sort its house out. No more excuses. The council needs to sort this out. It's about responsiveness. Someone at Craven Vale (resident) had broken down a fence and was extending into the allotment – onto someone's plot. I emailed the council. Got no response. What do we have to do?

2nd point – thank you BHAF for the development fund which went to a mini bed scheme on our plots. Thanks to the hard work of volunteers from our committee we've laid out 10 beds. For 3 months I was waiting for the council to contact people on the waiting list and it was only when BHAF intervened that action was taken. Now all those beds are filled. The demand is there but you're not doing your jobs.

Q: C – site rep – Keston. I've been a site rep for 10 years. Many emails over a number of years to the council have been ignored. The admin workers on the frontline are marvellous. In the middle management there's a gaping hole. Somebody isn't doing their job and that needs to be sorted out before the service can be sorted out.

Q: A – Mile Oak site rep. Will the increase in staff ensure site and plot inspections will be done in a timely manner this year?

A: Cllr Tim Rowkins - Yes I'd hope so. The inspections are a critical link in the chain. Regardless of the strategy we end up with, this is low hanging fruit to get moving on soon.

Chenine Bhatena - New ops manager will focus on allotments this year. New allotments post should give us more capacity. Top 3 things to resolve: site lettings, site rep training and inspections. There are multiple issues with the new IT system and IT consultants have a deadline of end April to set a way forward. We've set timelines on this so we can move forward quickly. Agree we need to look at responsiveness. We have a small team so we have to find a way to do things better. We need to monitor emails better too and ensure they're responded to in a timely way.

Q: This is an experience I want to share. 13 years ago I became a co-worker. I signed an official co-working agreement and was given keys by the shop. I'm aware of less official ways of co-working and I would urge people to use the agreement in place.

A: Chair: Anyone co-working should sign an agreement with the council.

Q: S – the Weald – have volunteered to be a site rep. ¼ plots.... Why did they stop? They were well used. How much could the council be losing in rents? We have plots that people gave up officially years ago. Since the AGM publicity we've suddenly had a flurry of lettings.

A: Chair: It works out around £25,000 a year in lost revenue if the figure of 317 vacant plots is correct.

Q: F from Weald – waiting list 6 yrs. It alarmed me that you said you'd not let plots that are hugely overgrown. I actually want a plot that I can bring back to life.

A: Chenine Bhatena - We need to prioritise those already cleared whilst addressing the more overgrown plots. We can let them in the state they are - we'll have a think about that.

A: Chair: There is also a lot of grass roots energy in volunteers who want to help.

Q: J – have been coworker for 20 yrs. Thank you BHAF for all your work. A great gathering here today. Good to hear the debate. It's essential that allotments remain in the public... what can the council do to protect this? Priorities – no comment on lack of funding that must have impacted the service the council can provide. They need to acknowledge that. This makes priorities all the more important. Agree it's a good idea to agree

priorities but let's not over commit, make them achievable and timed - we want to see them happen.

A: Chair: most of the council sites are statutory allotment sites. They can be developed but only by agreement from the Secretary of State. But there could be more protection.

Q: A – Coldean – maintenance and rubbish clearance. We have personally cleared 50 sacks of plastic from Coldean Lane and many trips to the tip from the allotment from rubbish accumulated at the site. The agreement says the council will remove it. There's a great pile of rubbish by the gate [which I can't move myself] and new rubbish is being added to it. I can't contact plot holders to inform them not to leave rubbish when I don't have their emails. The Council has just put up a sign saying 'flytipping will be prosecuted'. Maintenance: all they have done is install a tap upside down. Please can you improve on this.

Chair: These are more comments, but noted.

Q: Site rep – Windmill Hill Rottingdean. Why don't you reply to my emails?

A: Rob Walker – the admin team do reply but don't always know the answers. Sometimes when they escalate things, they don't get answers. Some of this is to do with the enormous volume of emails we get, but we could do better and we need to do this. But it's not all aspects of the service that don't answer you.

Point from S – Horsedean & Patcham – the maintenance on our site is OK and our hedges were cut last year.

Chair: It's nice to hear a positive story.

Q: When they do the new assessment of plots will they assess whether they're being properly used?

A: Chair – when people struggle to maintain a plot or half plot, there's not much for them. Micro plots is one solution. Or Community plots. An alternative is getting co-workers from the waiting list – would need thinking about but it's worth considering.

Q: Is there any discussion around different sized plots? This may be the solution? It may mean more admin but could work.

A: Chair – We've looked at this in detail whilst developing the 2024 strategy. Full and half plots work well but smaller ones create problems – everyone wants a shed etc. Community plots that people work together were the answer. 22% of people said they'd like an alternative in our survey – we

Comment – site rep. I've been coming to these meetings for years and I wanted to say, my interaction with the maintenance team has been very good.

Chair: It's nice to end on a positive note. Thanks to everyone for attending.