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***Committee Meeting, June 11th, 2013@ 6.30pm***

**The Haven, Pankhurst Avenue, Brighton.**

**In attendance:**

Allan Brown, Mark Carroll, Emily Gardiner, Anne Glow, Richard Howard, Russ Howarth, Gary Johnson, Tania Johnson, Steve Lucas, Simon Powell.

**Apologies for Absence:**

Linda Long, Melanie Matthews, Alan Phillips.

**Minutes of the Last Meeting:**

The minutes of the last BHAF Committee Meeting were formally approved.

**Matters Arising:**

None

**Site Association Reps and the BHAF Committee.**

At the 2012 BHAF AGM, a special motion was put forward requesting that the Fed take measures to become more representative of its members. The Fed Committee embraced this special motion and the situation was immediately improved by more volunteers agreeing to sit on the Committee, which over the previous few years had been staffed by just a handful of volunteers.

A working group convened to redraft the Fed’s ‘Objectives’ and this emphasised the need for greater representation. Following this work was undertaken to update the Fed’s Constitution and several suggestions were presented to our members at the 2013 AGM. (A wholesale update of the Constitution will take place after the conclusion of the B&H Allotment Strategy, as this may have a bearing on how the Fed works.)

One of the constitutional changes suggested, and indeed voted through at the AGM, was the idea of encouraging allotment sites across the City to form Site Associations and elect a representative/ delegate that could attend BHAF Committee Meetings.

(Currently the following sites have active Asociations: Eastbrook Farm, Moulscoomb Estate, RAGS (Roedale Allotment & Garden Society); Tenantry Down and The Weald.)

Moulscoomb Estate was the first site to elect an Association Rep/ Site Delegate (exact term yet to be decided) - Richard Howard - and we welcomed him to his inaugural meeting.

Despite suggesting this constitutional change, the Fed had not yet had an opportunity to work out in detail exactly how this new system would work. The BHAF Constitution currently states that elected Association Reps/ Delegates were invited to attend BHAF Committee Meetings, however they would not be full members of the Committee as they are not elected/ voted for at the AGM. As a result they would not have an automatic right to attend Liaison Meetings (bi-monthly meetings between the BHAF and the Council.)

RH clarified that the position of the Fed is to encourage more sites to create associations, or for smaller sites to join together to create associations. (EG said that Patcham is hoping to create an association this summer and Chates Farm is in the process of forming one.)

To this end the Committee agreed that we need to create a page on the BHAF website, to share examples of simple constitutions, that would facilitate and encourage sites to form Associations. We would set out a list of ‘minimum requirements’ that any Association would need to adhere to, in order to qualify for affiliation to the Fed. (For example, we need to ensure that Association Meetings in which their rep/ delegate is voted for are adequately advertised prior to convening - notices on gates etc. – and that the elections are open and transparent.) The minimum number (quorum) of members needed to form an Association was briefly discussed and also whether existing Associations kept minutes of their meetings and how these minutes were made available to the Association members as well as other plot-holders on site. (RAGS, for example, pin up their minutes in the site tea-hut.) It was also suggested that those sites that currently have active/ established associations could mentor fledging associations and share examples of best practise – ie. good practise guidelines. (This will be an on-going process of refinement and improvement.)

The potential problem was raised that there if the policy of encouraging sites to create associations and elect delegates is successful that we may get too many people attending Committee Meetings – both in terms of the physical space available and that too large a Committee may hinder it’s effective functioning.

It was generally agreed that we should tackle that problem when we come to it. If there are too many people wanting to attend Committee meetings, we could split the meetings up or find an alternative, larger venue. However, having too many people wanting to attend is generally a more preferable situation than the traditional problem of not having sufficient numbers. At this stage it is not possible to gauge whether most association reps/ delegates would want to attend every meeting or whether they would just choose to attend meetings that have a specific relevance to their site. (It may be that additional ‘special’ Committee meetings are called in which all association reps are invited to attend to vote on specific issues that have a direct bearing on all sites.)

Richard Howard felt that the Fed have traditionally been poor at communication, which most were in agreement with. However, this has been largely due to the low numbers of volunteers on the Fed Committee and the workload that good communication entails. There have been some improvement on this front – the BHAF website has been redesigned, minutes are published within days of meetings, our newsletter has been going out more regularly and our facebook page has been more active. However, due to time and financial constraints, most communication has and will continue to be done via email/ BHAF website and one of the roles of Association Reps/ Delegates would be to ensure that relevant communication from the Fed is shared amongst plot-holders on sites via notice boards/ signs on gates etc.

**Determining make up of BHAF team to attend Liaison Meetings.**

Liaison Meetings between the Fed and the Council take place bi-monthly. These meetings take place at the Council offices at Stanmer and due to the size of the room there is a limit to how many Committee members can attend. Numbers attending, from both the Council and the Fed, fluctuate but it has become clear that as the number of Fed Committee members has increased we would need to formulate a core team that would represent the Fed at these meetings. The Council currently have three people that attend these meetings – David Cooper (Allotment Officer), Graeme Rolf (Operations Manager, Cityparks) and Lizzie Dean (Green Party, Allotment Councillor). However, it is unusual for all three to attend simultaneously.

Richard H felt that Association Reps should be able to attend these meetings. The majority of the rest of the Committee felt that this was unworkable and that the agreed team representing the Fed would be attending on behalf of the Committee as a whole. Committee members and Association Reps would have the opportunity to discuss issues at regular Fed Committee meetings and the ‘Liaison Team’ would then be presenting these issues on their behalf at the Liaison Meetings.

SL explained that Committee members are voted for at the AGM and are thus democratically elected to represent our members at these meetings. Association Reps are elected to represent their particular site, so differ slightly from regular Committee members. RH hoped that the TOR (Terms of Reference) for the various meetings would be looked at in greater detail as part of the Strategy process as he felt there was a degree of overlap and thus the potential for confusion between the various meetings that take place. ie. BHAF Committee Meetings, Liaison Meetings and Site Rep meetings.

After some discussion it was agreed that the Fed needed a team of about six people and the following Committee Members expressed the desire to represent the Fed at the Liaison Meetings:

Allan Brown (Secretary)

Mark Carroll (Publicity Officer)

Anne Glow

Russ Howarth (Vice-Chair)

Gary Johnson (Plot Liaison Officer)

Steve Lucas

[Melanie Matthews (Web-master) was unable to make this meeting, so she may wish to attend Liaison Meetings and Emily Gardiner (Treasurer) said she would be happy to attend if she was needed.] It is unlikely that all of the named above would be able to attend every meeting, so alternative Committee members may be called on to attend on occasion.

SP explained that there are currently no direct meetings between the Fed and site reps without a Council Officer present and this is something that may need to be looked into as he was keen to foster a greater spirit of co-operation between site reps and the Fed.

**The Weald ‘Traffic Light System’ and Linda’s resignation.**

Last year so many notices were served that the system became unworkable and several sites failed to get their second inspection and thus no tenants were evicted and a number of the worst kept plots remained under-cultivated for another year. It was agreed at a Site Rep meeting in 2012 (see Site Rep Meeting Minutes on BHAF website) that this year we would restrict notices to being given only to the worst 10 – 15% of plot-holders. This would ensure that the most neglected plots would be brought back into proper cultivation.

In May it was brought to the attention of several Committee members that the Weald had placed the following notice on their gates:

(B&H Council logo)

**Brighton & Hove City Council**

**PLOT INSPECTIONS**

**Important notice to all allotment holders**

Weald site representatives will carry out plot inspections within the first two weeks of every month.

They will be using a ‘traffic light’ colour coding system where Green means good, Yellow means that a plot requires some attention and Red means a plot is not being maintained to a standard that will ensure continued tenancy.

Any resulting notices will be in accordance with the Allotment Rules 2011.

A decision to terminate a tenancy is not one that is taken lightly, but we do have long waiting lists for plots and if you are not using your plot, it is only fair that the plot is allocated to someone who wants to use it for its intended purpose.

(David Cooper’s signature)

David Cooper

Allotment Officer.

A number of Weald tenants were alarmed by this notice and complaints/ enquiries were sent to three Committee members as well as the local allotment campaigning group ‘Don’t Lose the Plot’.

EG explained that the impression given by the notices being on council headed paper with the signature of the Allotment Officer at the bottom is that this was a council led initiative as opposed to a local association initiative. This additional inspection procedure seemed to be at odds with the previously agreed 10-15% worst offenders policy agreed at a Site Rep meeting last year – a meeting at which a vote was taken on the issue. EG explained that as a tenant you have an agreement with the council. Unless everyone on a site is part of an association, then non-members should be able to choose whether they want to be part of that system.

This issue was then raised at the last Liaison Meeting and following some discussion David Cooper agreed to get the notices taken down. (It would appear that the notices are still up at the Weald on the day of this Committee Meeting, ie 11th June 2013.) In addition Melanie Matthews and Russ Howarth wrote to the Weald site reps in order to convene a meeting to discuss the issue and clarify the Fed’s position. (The following bullet points are a summary of the points that the Fed would like to discuss with the Weald site reps.)

1.    Fully support associations to do things their own way, but we as BHAF represent all tenants and their interests, and once people complained we are duty bound to follow up.

2.       Were plot-holders consulted? If not - why not? If they were consulted were all plot-holders given sufficient notice that this issue would be discussed at their AGM or special meeting, ie were notices put up on gates alerting them prior to this initiative being discussed.

3.       What do the site reps see as the positives about this system?  What do they see as the negatives?

4.       Have they considered how it could affect plot-holders with mental health issues?

5.       How many actual inspections are they doing (ie the ones that result in notices) each year

6.       Our reasons for asking David to withdraw his public support – that this could make it look like the rules (which it isn’t) and suggest that other sites might be encouraged to do the same (which they won’t).

7.       How we take things forward to ensure a good working relationship, and the best for all allotment tenants

8.       Could they give an example of a plot which received red and amber lights and do we feel this fits with the council’s suggested 10-15% of plots?

However, to date, all attempts to open up a discussion with the Weald about this issue have failed. In addition RH clarified that he contacted and asked LL for clarification on details about the system but she has not got back to him. GJ has done similar. AB has also formally written to LL in his capacity as Secretary.

It was suggested that the ‘traffic light’ system was supposed to be a friendly, helpful service and indeed informal verbal advice being given to plot-holders prior to official inspections was a policy that was discussed at the last Site Rep meeting and generally seen as a positive action for all concerned. AB felt if this was the intention then there would be no need to have Council headed posters and that plot-holders who wish to partake in such a scheme should simply opt in. (It is unclear whether the colour-coded warning notices would be pinned to the bottom of people’s plots for all to see.) Such a scheme, if compulsory, or even giving the impression that it was compulsory, is working against the overall BHAF policy of raising the standards of cultivation through encouragement as opposed to threats. (To this end the weed/ cultivation notices have been redrafted by the Fed to read in a less threatening manner.)

Off the back of a critique of this ‘traffic light’ system discussed on DLTP’s facebook page, a FED committee member and Weald site rep has resigned.

SP said we need to encourage people to complain directly to the Fed as opposed to DLTP, although EG and TJ suggested that many plot-holders may feel intimidated or uncomfortable with contacting their site reps directly and DLTP provided a useful channel to share their experiences. SL agreed with SP that there is a blurring between the BHAF and DLTP as a couple of Committee members belonged to both bodies.

RH described how site reps from other sites may have got the impression that DC would be doing these Weald monthly inspections and were concerned that as a result he would be unable to do inspections on their sites and thus there was the danger that no evictions of the worst 10% would take place, as happened last year.

RH stressed it would be courteous to float ideas like the ‘traffic light system’ at a site rep meeting prior to implementation. MC felt that both the Weald and the Allotment Officer should have consulted with the Fed before putting up these notices, as we could have pointed out our reservations prior to them going up. The notice could have been amended accordingly. We as the Fed have some obligation to ensure that agreements made at associations are done in a manner that is open and transparent.

RH asked whether the Fed should contact members of the Weald to enquire whether they are happy with the ‘traffic light’ system. This was generally agreed to be a positive thing to do and MC to draft an email to the Weald tenants. He will run it by the committee for approval prior to sending the emails.

**Dev fund request & policy.**

EG presented a few dev fund applications that have come into the Fed.

Eastbrook - £340 strimmer

Peacock Lane - £170 strimmer

Coldean – bird protection poles/ nets for

Racehill – strimmer (this request was discussed at a previous Committee Meeting but a decision was postponed due to the change-over of Treasurers and further clarification that was needed over certain issues.)

Strimmer for Racehilll - they have answered a set of questions we put to them. Racehill will do a health and safety disclaimer and the strimmer will be stored off site but only five minutes away. It will be available for all Racehill tenants to use.

EG stressed that all dev fund requests need to be done by email, rather than phone conversations, as there is a then a record of all discussions. In the future it would be good to instigate a system of checking with tenants on site how much use they get from the equipment.

MC disagrees in principle with the purchasing of strimmers for sites. He feels they should only be bought for sites with associations, so they can oversee the hiring/ renting of the equipment. MC feels that each time we purchase a strimmer we set a precedent that makes it more difficult to implement a better system.

TJ feels we should see/ keep a record of which sites have had strimmers previously, so we can track if equipment is being used properly and to ensure that sites all benefit equally from dev fund.

EG queried what constitutes a communal area on a site and what comes under the Councils obligation. SP said that he believed that all internal pathways on a site do not come under the council’s remit, only haulageways.

RH said we need to make a statement to inform plot-holders that in future we would like to instigate a system whereby smaller sites could share equipment. We expect the equipment to be shared amongst tenants. We will post a notice on the BHAF website stating that in future all strimmer requests to be put on hold until we’ve looked at the system.

**Community Plots and adherence to rules.**

The Fed received an enquiry from a tenant who’d received a weed order last year, but felt that an adjoining Community Plot was in a worse condition than his plot and was enquiring whether Community Plots have a different inspection criteria.

David Cooper stated that the rules are the same for community plots as they are for regular individual plots.

**Biodiversity/ wildlife working group**

Rich H brought up the issue of biodiversity of wildlife across the city’s allotments. He said there are a number of trained ornithologists on the Mouslcoomb Estate Site and that we should utilising the many wildlife experts that must exist on every site. He suggested creating a bio-diversity working group. RH said that RAGS are looking into the process of looking/ recording wildlife on site and forwarding this information to a national wildlife survey. RH suggested we start communication between sites and share bio-diversity studies. RH agreed that this is already being discussed as part of the Strategy discussions and we have recently met with Richard Howarth of the B&H Biosphere bid.

**Competitions**

Because the Council/ City in Bloom no longer run the allotments competition, the Fed has been asked to put forward an additional £550 towards the competitions. In total we’ve been asked to contribute £650 to this year’s competition.

EG felt that we’ve been asked to contribute to something that we’ve not had sufficient time to research alternative funding properly and looked in greater detail at the breakdown of costs. She felt we as the Fed had been put in a slightly awkward position and wondered whether funding the competitions was a good use of limited Federation funds.

(Costs include the expenses of judges, posters/ advertising and prize money.)

SL offered to speak to John Burns for further clarification about the breakdown of costs. Even though we’ve actually got double the number of entrants this year compared to last, numbers are still low and AG wondered whether this is something that we want to run again next year.

(There was a large increase in costs in one year because Harvest had applied for lottery funding and they designed the posters etc. and charged accordingly. This accounts for the spike in funding for competitions and is not necessarily reflective of the average costs of running them.)

**AOB**

GJ said ‘Allotment Watch’ is underway and he’s been working alongside PC Funnel. Posters are being put up on all sites declaring sites are part of the Allotment Watch scheme and so far 80 individuals have signed up to the scheme. Due to data protection individual plot-holders have to sign up with the scheme themselves. There were some problems with signing up, but GJ has been reassured that the process has now been automated and should work a lot smoother. GJ and PC Funnel have submitted a form to win a grant which will be used to increase awareness of the scheme through posters and stickers etc.

*Meeting finished at 9.45pm.*