**BHAF: Special Committee Meeting**

**(Determining the Allotment Strategy Review Team)**

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**The Haven, Brighton.**

**28/8/12,**

**In attendance:**

Simon Powell, John Burns, Steve Lucas, Anne Glow, Lynn Long, Mark Carroll, Gary Johnson, Tania Johnson, Allan Brown

1. **Apologies for absence**

Melanie Mathews

**2. Volunteers to represent the BHAF at Council Allotment Strategy Meetings:**

Derrick Bown, Russ Howarth, Tessa Pawsey, Alan Philips

John Burns outlined details of the ‘Allotment Strategy Review’ to the committee. The ‘review’ has been called for by Pete West in order to protect and improve the service for the next 3-5 years, especially in the light of possible further central government cuts in funding. There has been one meeting to date between the Fed. committee, Gillian Marston and other members of the council associated with the allotment service. It was agreed at this initial meeting that the BHAF would put together a team of six people to go forward into these discussions and the council would do likewise. The exact make up of the council’s team is yet to be determined but looks likely to include Gillian Marston, Rob Walker, Ben Annis & David Cooper. These meetings would take place over the winter of 2012/ 2013, lasting about 6 – 8 months. In addition to the two teams outlined above, various council experts ie. members of the council legal team, sustainability team etc., as well as other relevant bodies like Harvest would be consulted/ invited to specific meetings.

Although it was undecided, at the outcome of the meeting, as to exactly what the final mix of ‘external volunteers’ to BHAF committee members would be, it had been informally agreed at a previous committee meeting that there would be at least three BHAF committee members on the final strategy team. It was agreed that all candidates, including the prospective committee members, would ultimately be decided by a show of hands. Although no formal consensus was agreed on, as to exactly what criteria the applicants would be selected, it was felt by the majority of committee members that all candidates would need to be happy to represent the BHAF plot holders on the new list of Fed. objectives, as voted for by BHAF membership at the last SGM. To this end candidates were questioned specifically on their views about the rent rise issue and the affordability of plots. It was the feeling of the majority of committee members that the team that went forward to these strategy meetings would need to be able to present a united front, at least on those issues for which we have some representational legitimacy, namely rent and the half/ full plot issue.

Given that all the prospective candidates were volunteers and generously offering their time and expertise, it was deemed that a formal interview would be inappropriate. However, John Burns outlined three questions that would be conducive to getting a discussion underway:

What makes you want to be part of the strategy process?

What experience do you have?

What is their availability to attend meetings?

We were very fortunate to have such high calibre volunteers, all of which have a long history of involvement with allotments. Given the nature of the meeting I feel it would be inappropriate to discuss the candidates’ specific answers to the opening questions. However, lots of good ideas, thoughts and observations emerged during the discussion and these will all be relevant to the upcoming strategy process, so I have recorded them below so we will be able to refer back to them and indeed make available to the wider BHAF membership. It is hoped that they will serve to get the wider consultation underway.

* In order for the strategy to be as broad as possible we need a wide range of views going into the discussions.
* To this end we need to consult as widely as possible with plot holders. The council have indicated that they intend too intended to consult widely, although exactly how wide, or by what means is currently unclear. The recent “Whitehawk Hill – Your Opportunity to Shape It’s Future” initiative by B&H City Council was referred to as a possible example of the sort of consultation document that may emerge.
* It was agreed that following the first formal ‘strategy meeting’ the Fed. would post details on the BHAF website, outlining and informing plot holders about these strategy meetings and inviting feedback from it’s membership. In addition it seems likely that several special meetings, workshops would be lined up, whereby ‘the strategy team’ could report back to interested plot holders as to how discussions are progressing and there would be opportunities for plot holders to bring their thoughts and ideas to the table. In addition notes from the meetings would be regularly posted on the BHAF website.
* It was suggested that we look at other council allotment services for examples of best practise.
* The issue of half plots was discussed. Reflecting the recent results from a vote taken at a site rep. meeting where there was a consensus that automatic plot halving was detrimental to good growers who were limited by not having access to the traditional 10 rod plot. It was agreed that whilst some plot holders were happy with half plots, there should be flexibility in the system so keen growers could benefit from larger plots. The increase in administrative work, but no additional income, generated by the policy of automatic plot halving was having a detrimental effect on the service
* The issue of the rent rise and the cost of renting a plot were discussed. There were differing opinions expressed. Some felt that the cost of renting a plot should be increased, as this may result in some plot holders taking their responsibility of having a plot more seriously and may deter those who take on a plot and do little with it, resulting in poorly maintained plots. Opposing this, views were expressed that on this particular issue, we had a clear directive from the BHAF membership, who voted at an SGM on new set of objectives. One of these related specifically to the cost of renting an allotment, ie. that the Fed. has a duty to: *5/ To work to ensure that allotments are and remain affordable to all. In particular, to support allotment-holders wanting sufficient allotment land to provide themselves and their families with a year-round supply of food crops, and to challenge any allotment rules which prevent or restrict this ability.*
* There was a recognition that the allotment service has been seriously underfunded although the point was made that in fact we have more resources dedicated to the service now than we did several years ago. The idea of higher rents, but greater concessionary rates for those on low incomes was raised. The example of bus passes for the over 60’s was mentioned, whereby the concession wasn’t funded by those who didn’t qualify but was funded by central government. The point was made that allotments traditionally have always been kept affordable for those on the lowest incomes and to change this would be to change the nature of allotments. To this end the fact that allotments are a service and this is enshrined in allotment law (1908 Allotment Act) was pointed out.
* It is clear that additional funding for the allotment service, given the current economic climate, is highly unlikely so any solutions that are arrived at for improving the service will have to take this into account. The idea of partial self-management was raised. It was agreed that all options should be entertained at the outset and that we should be prepared to think laterally. The point was made that it was simply not feasible for one allotment officer to manage so many sites across the city.
* It was agreed that in order to have a successful strategy, we need to have accurate and up to date data. The council database was discussed and how improvements can be made. The need for ‘sample testing’ and evidence based data collection was raised, as was the need to consult with all the major political parties.
* The issue of site reps was discussed. Are site reps representing the council or the plot holders? Would their job be made easier if they were elected as opposed to appointed, or volunteered for?
* The idea of forming more allotment associations was raised. Although difficulties as to how exactly this would work for the smaller sites, those sites that do have associations are working well and could provide a model that could be applied more widely. Allotment associations could be the model for varying degrees of partial self management, whereby maintenance, the appointment/ election of site reps etc. could be taken ‘in-house’.
* The idea that plot-holders should be able to pay electronically was raised. Rather than plot holders paying one lump sum at the start of each year, which is difficult for some tenants, it was deemed that in this day and age people should be offered greater flexibility as to how they pay, and that payments could be spread out over the course of a year.
* There was a brief discussion on the wider importance of allotments to people and communities. Allotments bring individual as well as community benefits. They are vital to the physical and mental well being of people across a whole cross-section of the community. Allotments and the benefits of allotments need to be actively promoted by the council.
* The protection of existing allotment sites was discussed. Not all B&H allotment sites have statutory protection. The opening up of additional allotment sites was briefly discussed, although most agreed that getting the sites we currently have working more efficiently was the more pressing issue. However, the size of the waiting list and how to address this will be central to the strategy review.
* It was suggested that encouraging plot holders to garden in an environmentally friendly manner was an important subject that should be central to the strategy. Plot holders should be encouraged to save and store water, water economically, and garden in a manner that reduces water usage. The subject of helping novice gardeners was briefly explored. It was suggested that new tenants could receive a booklet alongside the Allotment Rule Book when taking on a plot. Also the fact that most sites have growers that would be more than willing to work with and mentor novice plot holders, was something that should be looked at in more detail.

After the candidates had left a vote was taken to determine the make up of the final team that will go into the strategy review meetings. Only those candidates, including committee members, with a majority of votes were selected. The specific reasons for individual committee members voting for the way they did were not disclosed. Two of the four ‘outside volunteers’ were successful, in that they received more votes in favour than against. The two committee members that had expressed a wish to be part of the strategy team were similarly voted in. This left two potential spaces on the final strategy team and as a result two further committee members volunteered their services, and were voted in by a majority.

The final team will consist of:

Simon Powell (BHAF committee member)

Anne Glow (BHAF committee member)

Mark Carroll (BHAF committee member)

Allan Brown (BHAF committee member)

Alan Philips (BHOGG, Seedy Sunday)

Russ Howarth (RAGGS)

The BHAF would like to thank all those that volunteered their time and expertise to take part in this meeting. We hope that everyone involved will continue to contribute to the process, as their input is valued greatly.

(I apologise for any inaccuracies that I may have made in my attempts to record this fast moving discussion. If I have omitted anything or failed to accurately record points that were made please contact me and I will endeavour to correct them.)

Allan Brown *(BHAF Secretary.)*