

ALLOTMENT SITE REPS FOCUS GROUP WORKSHOP 2

8th September 2015

“Up until now it feels like we’ve been starved of having communication with each other.”

Workshop participant

1. Overview

1.1 Introduction and background

Date Tuesday 8th September 2015

Time 5.30 to 7.30 pm

Venue Pelham room at the Brighthelm Centre, Brighton

Participants:

- Maureen Winder Moulsecoomb Estate
- Richard Howard Moulescoomb Estate
- Alan Marshall Roedale Valley
- Ted Chapman St. Louis Home
- Rob Froud Tenantry Down lower section
- Naomi Marks Thompson Road
- Jane Griffin Whitehawk Hill
- Mark Shanahan Windmill Hill Rottingdean
- Jude Stevens North Neville
- Jane Hawkins Craven Vale
- Alan Brown Allotment Federation Committee

- Ben Messer Facilitator – Food Matters

Workshop focus:

The key focus of **Workshop 2** was to build on the outcomes of the site reps focus group **Workshop 1** held in November 2013. **Workshop 1** aimed to provide an opportunity for the voice of site reps to be heard and their opinions and perspective included in the consultation on development of an Allotment Strategy for Brighton and Hove. **Workshop 1** followed a large consultation event with plot holders and plot waiting-listers held the previous week. Outcomes of this event with specific relevance to site reps were incorporated into the November site reps **Workshop 1** for site reps to consider and discuss.

This follow-on **Workshop 2** (on 8th September 2015) focused on 3 key issues arising from the earlier consultation. It aimed to dig deeper into specific high priority issues feeding into on-going work by the Allotments Federation providing clearer guidance on the role, function and mechanisms associated with the role of site reps.

Workshop 2 was again facilitated by Ben Messer from Food Matters following the response from participants to **Workshop 1** which was seen as extremely worthwhile and constructive. As before the facilitation used an approach based on participatory appraisal and aimed to establish an inclusive, mutually respectful, engaging environment where the individual opinions and suggestions of each participant were equally valued and participants were able to build on each others' thinking.

This report presents the key outcomes from the workshop and follows the same structure as the workshop itself.

1.2 The aims of Workshop 2 were:

- Share experiences of the site rep role
- Consider what motivates people to take on the role
- Acknowledge some of the challenges of the site rep role
- Explore and clarify what the role entails and what is expected of site reps
- Feed into the development of a clear site rep role description
- Discuss the support and guidance site reps need
- Determine what site reps can expect and require to fulfil their role effectively

2. Key Outputs

The key outputs of the workshop are presented as a summary of the comments that were made as written comments on post-it notes, flip-charts and as recorded by the facilitator during group discussion. These have been divided into three sections:

- Experiences of being a site rep – motivation and challenges
- Understanding of the role of site rep – role description
- Support for site reps – guidance, advice and training

2.1 Experiences of being a site rep

As participants arrived they were asked to consider and respond to the following question using post-it notes. This became the basis for introductions and initial discussion on what motivates site reps and some of the challenges they face.

BEING A SITE REP

Which 3 words sum up what this means to you?

Positive:

- **Communication** – with Allotment office, plot-holders, Allotment Federation Committee the local community – ‘looking outwards’
- **Social:** Involvement – meeting new people – community
- **Investment:** giving something back
- **Support:** caring – sharing – helpful
- **Responsibility:** people, environment, rule enforcement, maintaining cohesion
- **Satisfaction:** interesting - heartening

Negative:

- **Thankless:** amazed at the level of input
- **Frustration:** people leaving plots – 30 every year (large site) – missed appointments – getting new people involved
- **Tension**
- **Guilt**
- **Blamed**
- **Unpredictable:** part of what makes it interesting
- **Weeds**
- **Difficult**

2.2 Understanding the role of site rep

Participants were asked to consider how they would respond to the following question.

Allotment site rep. – what's that all about?

Individual responses on post-it notes were then clustered by participants to identify common themes. These were then discussed to further clarify and expand upon what the theme included and represented. The outcomes would then contribute to the on-going work on developing a site rep role description

Help and advice

- Being someone tenants can turn to for advice
- Sorting out problems and hopefully stopping some from happening
- Problem solve – help tenants
- Try to explain what happens on allotments – how to get started
- Starting/introducing new gardeners
- Enabling people to enjoy growing and to enjoy being outside – facilitating the process

Letting and site care

- A plot holder who tries to ensure the site is well cultivated and runs smoothly
- Letting plots and hoping for the best
- Showing new people round and letting plots to them
- Letting plots to new people – admin.
- Letting out plots of land to cultivate and grow your own vegetables etc.
- It's about helping to ensure the smooth running of an allotment site
- Looking after an allotment site and people who have plots already
- **Bigger picture:** Maintaining an overview of the site, supporting and helping plot-holders, liaising with people on the site and outside

Facilitating wider benefits

- Explaining the benefits that there are socially and health-wise
- Helping people realise you get more out than you put in – the sum is greater than the individual parts
- Helping community find 'inner peace'

'Middle person'

- Eyes and ears for the Council
- Enforcement of allotment rules and regulations
- A volunteer that acts as intermediary between Council allotment staff and plot holders
- Representing plot holders
- The interface between other plot holders and the Council
- Liaise with Allotment Officer and office

'Eco' role

- Protect wildlife and environment

Additional comments from discussion:

Problem-solving for site reps:

- Need a facilitated session dedicated specifically and solely to problem solving
- Focus on practical administration issues and processes
- Allotment Federation has committed to resource this

Communication:

- A big issue – with tenants, between site reps, with Council

Rules and regulations:

- You also stand up for plot holders – you know the story
- Tricky – as you are a plot holder.
- Some tension – but this could be lessened by having elected site reps.

Inspection process:

- Better for site to inspect plots with the maintenance team (Bruce)
- Report back to the Council Officer – only gets involved if necessary

Other issues:

- Need a clear process of notification when plots are vacated
- Need to clarify rules – logical and simplified – in rule book as part of new tenant starter pack
- Need fewer plots per site rep

Training / support for site reps

TOPIC Training / support area	WHAT? Content / focus	HOW? Approach / where	WHO? Delivery
A. SITE REP INDUCTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sporadic – so needs to be 1 at a time • Prospective site reps need clarity on their role before induction • Technicalities and practical issues only after role description clarified • Stress that there is no legal responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stanmer Office • 1 ½ hour session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council Allotment Officer – David Cooper
B. HEALTH AND SAFETY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinct part of induction and on-going whilst in the post • Must consider what should be expected of a volunteer site rep • Include site maintenance, buildings, pathways 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site visit to highlight good and bad practice • Illustrate/demonstrate • &/or include on website for reference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allotment Federation to facilitate transfer of information between site reps
C. COUNCIL SYSTEMS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefing for site reps on allotment related Council systems and processes including: Collection of fees Notices before expulsions Contractual obligations & regulations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council Briefing session • FAQ document pdf and on website 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council Allotment Officer – David Cooper
D. SITE REP ROLE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear role description being reviewed 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This workshop feeding into current work
E. SITE REP MEETINGS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular regional meetings e.g. 4-5 sites together • Sharing practice / knowledge / experiences 		
F. REGULAR CALL IN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity to raise issues and get support from Allotment Officer and maintenance staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular scheduled call-in by 'phone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council Allotment Office staff – David Cooper and Bruce, Sam and Ben

2.3 Support for site reps

Participants were asked to consider how the role of site rep could be supported in a way that encourages people to want to take the role on.

How can site reps be helped and supported to do the job as effectively as possible?

What training / support would be useful / helpful?

How should this be delivered / made available?

Who should be providing the training / support?

Responses were collected on a grid which is reproduced on the following page.

3. Conclusions

Participants felt that the workshop had been very productive and worthwhile. The opportunity to come together and share experiences in itself was seen as extremely valuable and helped to overcome some of the feelings of isolation felt by some site reps.

Outcomes from the two sessions discussing the site reps role and their training and support needs provided useful outcomes which can be incorporated into the Allotment Federation work on producing a clear role description for site reps and exploring training and support for site reps.

In addition to this both sessions also highlighted the need for regular facilitated workshops to discuss specific issues and allow an opportunity for practical problem solving. There was an acknowledgement that there was a wealth of knowledge, skill and experience within the group of site reps and that there were very few opportunities for that to be shared and capitalised on. Based on the experience of both site rep Workshops participants felt that facilitation resulted in clearer outcomes and more productive meetings. **It was strongly suggested that the site reps would benefit greatly from regular facilitated workshops of this sort either for problem-solving generally or focused on specific issues and concerns.**

**Ben Messer
Food Matters
18th September 2015**