

**BRIGHTON AND HOVE
ALLOTMENT STRATEGY CONSULTATION**

SITE REPS FOCUS GROUP WORKSHOP

19th November 2013

“It's the first time I can remember site reps getting together like that and speaking openly about the challenges and problems on their sites, and also telling the good things, too.”

Workshop participant

1. Overview

1.1 Introduction and background

The workshop, supported by the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership, took place at the meeting room of the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership at the Brighthelm Centre, Brighton on Tuesday 19th November 2013.

The key focus of this event was 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. The workshop followed hot on the heels of 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 workshop for site reps to consider and discuss.

The workshop was facilitated by Ben Messer from Food Matters using an approach based on Participatory Appraisal. The facilitation established 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 the workshop were:

- Hear the voice of site reps
- Include their perspective in the development of the Allotment Strategy
- Understand the positive and negative factors that influence site reps experience
- Explore ways to strengthen positive factors and address the negative factors
- Discuss and address issues raised in the preceding Allotment Strategy event

2. Key Outputs

The key outputs of the event 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:

- Evaluating the experience of being a site rep
- Addressing positive and negative factors
- Discussion of key themes from plot holders consultation

2.1. Being a site rep

As participants arrived they were asked to consider and respond to the following question by drawing a cross on a line between VERY GOOD at one end and NOT AT ALL at the other. They were also asked to explain on a post-it why they had drawn their cross where they had:

BEING A SITE REP

How is the experience for you?

The question aimed to draw out individual perspectives on what it's like being a site rep and the positive and negative factors that influence their experience of the role.

Patterns:

- An overwhelming positive response to the role
- Most crosses in top third of the line (towards positive end)
- One cross representing a balance at half way between 'frustrating and rewarding'
- Two crosses in the bottom third
- Comments that described positive factors outweighed the negative

Responses:

Positive

- Meeting people
- Shared experience
- Limited complaints
- Almost manage themselves!
- I want to be useful and make other tenants feel that there is someone there for them

"The satisfaction of having let a plot to an enthusiastic gardener outweighs the disappointment of those who give up."

Negative

- Frustrating when **people don't work plots**
- **Waiting list** – contacting 30 people for a letting and only 3 turn up
- **Lack of pride** in the site
- **Difficult position/role** – Site reps feel caught between 'plot holders who moan' and the 'Council who do nothing'
- **Site reps being undermined by the Council** – failed plot holder evicted only to be reinstated by the Council

"2 Site Reps have resigned in my time."

2.2. Positive factors and how they could be strengthened

- Smaller sites are easier for Site Reps to deal with
- Easier to develop a sense of community between plot holders at smaller sites
 - Multiple site reps for larger sites
- Successful lettings promote goodwill and satisfaction
 - Important to identify committed growers and facilitate their allotment provision
- Advisory role leads to respect from plot holders
 - Identify more opportunities for Site Reps to provide advice, guidance, support and use their skills and experience
- Good rapport with Council Officer vital
 - Important to develop a relationship based on mutual trust
 - Council Officer needs more support and resources from the Council

2.3. Negative factors and how they could be addressed

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- **Role and responsibilities:**
Dual role creates tension: representing interests of tenants vs enforcing rules and regulations
Site Reps clear about their role and responsibilities – Allotmentees less so
 - Confirm and adopt role description
 - Ensure this is sent to new plot holders
 - Display at the site and Allotment Federation website along with Site Reps contact details
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- **Induction and training:**
Has been successful in the past
 - Reinstate based on inputs from experienced Site Reps
 - Include inputs from different sites
 - Include e.g. how to carry out site surveys
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- **Site Rep appointment mechanism:**
No clear mechanism for appointment and dismissal
 - Develop a clear process including a vote by plot holders
 - Need to ensure representation of specific site community
 - Especially need more women and more diverse
 - Incorporate a degree of site-specificity – overarching process with site specific elements
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- **Waiting lists and letting:**

Information sent out but often poor response from waiting listers due to outdated waiting list information

- improve the waiting list mechanism
- explore ways to assess real commitment and gather information
- share good practice on lettings management between different sites
- may need different approaches at different sites
e.g. arrange open (letting) day – contact top 30 on list – highest on list get first refusal

- **Rules:**

A lot of unnecessary rules

Many are not enforced or are not capable of being enforced

- Review the rules on a regular basis
- Stream-line rules – stick to important key principles
- Create a hierarchy of rules – distinguish between those enforced by council, and those enforced by the site reps
- Involve site reps in the rule review
- Set rules that accommodate a range of gardening approaches
- Acknowledge the need for overarching principles with a degree of site specific flexibility

Specific focus on non-cultivation rules and their enforcement

Different opinions

1. Too vague and discretionary

- People need to know where they stand
- Establish clear overarching city-wide rules and enforce them
- Non-cultivation and weed notices to be based on site reps inspection and enforced by Council Allotments Officer

2. Need to encompass a range of gardening approaches

- Rules need to reflect different approaches

Establish a greater sense of pride in the whole site – not just individual plots

- Stick to rules on responsibility for aspects of site maintenance

- **Relationship with the Council:**

When there is poor communication from Council to Site Reps this can be undermining; but also recognition that the Allotment officer role 'huge'

Allotmentees to Site Reps communication is good

- Officer needs an assistant or admin. support

Each new Allotment Officer needs to learn from scratch

- offer an induction or guide/manual
 - ensure proper over-lap with out-going officer
 - establish better continuity
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- **Plot size:**

Different opinions

1. Full plots only

- open new sites and expand to create new plots rather than sub-divide

2. Offer a range of plot sizes to meet different needs and get people off the waiting list

- offer ½ plots, community plots (plots sub-divided into beds), special needs plots etc.

- community plots demonstrate commitment and help develop skills before full plot tenancy

3. Co-workers as a way to sub-divide plots

Recognised as an effective route into allotment tenancy

Demonstrates commitment

- establish a clear mechanism and clarify rules

- ensure consistency

- manage hand-overs

2.4. Other issues

More of this:

Site Reps expressed their interest in more workshops similar to this one

- either: a smaller group of Site Reps could participate in facilitated conversations

- or: use this approach for future larger Site Reps meetings

Special needs plots:

A number of special needs plots are available at the Foredown, Coldean and Weald sites.

These plots are designed for people with limited mobility or other physical and mental conditions requiring specialist facilities and plot types (including raised beds, easy access and toilets in some cases). Many of these plots are not be used.

- Raise awareness city-wide to make better use of these facilities

- Focus on organisations supporting potential special needs allotmenters.

3. Evaluation

As participants left the workshop they were asked to say how it had been for them. Responses were given under four headings:

Something I liked

- Excellent facilitation. Really positive outcome
- So many dynamic ideas and the way it was facilitated
- Constructive discussion with facilitator
- Hearing other allotment rep opinions
- The energy and enthusiasm in the group
- Nice to hear reps view without the Council

Something I learned

- Other views and how important it is to share and listen to plot holders rather than assume
- There's a desire to improve
- A lot about how other sites operate and respect for other Site Reps

Something I will take away to do

- Evaluate our site and assess the needs more widely
- Making sure everyone knows how to contact me
- I'll volunteer to help induct new Site Reps

Something I didn't like

- Not enough time
- More time needed – more meetings needed

Participants

Edward	Daniell	Ridge Road Allotments, Falmer.
Giuseppina	Salamone	Moulsecoomb Estate
Allan	Marshall	Roedale Valley
Alan	Amos	Roedale Valley
Peter	Burrows	Tenantry Down
Jane	Hawkins	Craven Vale
Gerry	Nevill	Coldean
Maureen	Winder	Moulescoomb Estate
Melanie	Matthews	Lower roedale
richard	howard	Moulsecoomb Allotments
Steve	Lucas	Pankhurst
Russ	Howarth	Allotment Federation