

**Meeting of the Site Representatives of the Brighton & Hove Allotment Federation**

***Patcham Community Centre on Wednesday 18th September 2013 at 6-30pm***

***for 7-00pm start ( Tea and Coffee available )***

**AGENDA**

1. **Chair Introduction and Welcome**

Russ Howarth (Vice-chair BHAF) welcomed all present and expressed his intent to get the meeting finished by 9pm.

**2. Apologies**

BHAF COMMITTEE:

Tania Johnson – Committee Member

Gary Johnson – Plot Liaison Officer

Alan Phillips - Chair

Emily Gardiner - Treasurer

Lizzie Deane - Councillor

SITE REPS

John Low - Hildesland

Jeff Woods - Ovingdean

Jane Child – Roedale Valley

David Medhurst – Hogg’s Platt

Granville Wilcock – Horsdean

Steve Chapman – Chates Farm Cottage

John Smyth – Peacock Lane

Peter Ferris - The Weald

Mo Andrews - The Weald

Lyn Long - The Weald

Dave Cole- The Weald

Peter Burrows – Tenantry Down

Rosie Barnard – Thompson Road

Jeff Terry – Racehill

Melanie Matthews – Lower Roedale

Pete Elliot – Craven Vale

Derek Bown – Walpole Road

1. **Minutes of the June Meeting**

Ron Nicholson (Racehill) said his comment with regards Pete Ferris at the Weald wasn’t recorded in the minutes. RN had said that if someone approached Pete with any allotment related trouble he was certain Pete would be willing to help and that someone else at the meeting backed up this point.

The June minutes will be amended accordingly.

The minutes were then passed.

**4. Matters Arising from those minutes**

None

**5. Clarifying Site Rep expenses**

This has arisen because generally site reps have not been claiming for expenses they are entitled to. In addition some site reps don’t claim for a long period of time and then claim all in one go, thus making budgeting for the BHAF difficult.

David Cooper gave a brief outline of the issue. Steve Lucas clarified that expenses – particularly postage and phone calls – will be refunded, in fact the BHAF would very much like to refund these expenses!

DC expressed his concern that there are long established site reps out there that don’t appear to know that they can claim expenses. Recently a new site rep wanted to claim for an ink cartridge. DC explained this is unprecedented and stressed that all printing/ laminating etc. can be done at the Council offices. Site reps need simply to liaise with the Allotment Office for all office based support.

Gerry Neville (Coldean) asked if there were any expense forms available? SL said that there aren’t any formal expense forms and that in general submitting a scribbled note or sending an email was sufficient. SL explained that getting itemised phone records is difficult, so we really work this system by trust and there have never been any problems in this regard.

RH asked for a show of hands as to whether site reps felt the BHAF needed to produce expense forms (available for download on the website for example). The floor voted that they were happy with the existing system.

RN explained that he’d been submitting expense forms since March and that there had been some problems in communications with the BHAF that he wasn’t happy with.

RH explained that at the next BHAF Committee meeting, we’re going to discuss having a specific payment date, as accessing funds for the Treasurer is problematic as she needs another named Committee member in order to withdraw cash. By having site reps submitting expenses before a specified date would make this process a lot simpler.

RH explained that changing over signatories had proved rather lengthy and difficult and apologised on behalf of the BHAF for any delays. He explained we are currently working on streamlining the process.

The issue about keys not being returned by ex-tenants was raised by Trudi Carter (Tenantry Down). DC explained that keys fall under the council’s remit and he offered to discuss this issue with her directly after the meeting. However, in general, DC explained that site reps may end up keeping small sums of money as a result of taking key deposits and that site reps could drop excess funds off with him at the Council if they felt uncomfortable holding onto these funds.

RN (Racehill) said that he chases up tenants that have left by telephone and requests the key back in order for them to get their deposits back.

DC stressed that no site reps should ever be out of pocket for the work they carry out with regards allotments. However DC clarified that the Admin Fund is not bottomless – he explained that the Fed get 2.5% of the allotment rents, which works out at about £2500 per annum, and the BHAF uses this fund for all their own meetings, hiring venues for meetings etc. So any claims beyond the basic telephone and postal charges must be cleared with the Allotment Officer beforehand.

With regards the returning of deposits for keys RH questioned whether it would be possible to alter the in perpetuity clause (as is currently the case), so if you haven’t claimed your deposit within a time period of say 6 months, those funds get fed into the BHAF funds. Steve Miller at Eastbrook explained that the majority of tenants simply leave a plot and never return them. This was a common scenario across the city.

RN (Racehill) questioned whether the key deposit of £10 is enough? RH clarified that there are different prices for keys at different sites because not all sites have the same type of lock. TC (Tenantry Down) explained that £20 for a lost key has put off nearly all requests for replacement keys. DC explained that when this issue came up some years ago Gillian Marston (City Parks) was strongly against raising the deposit for keys, as she felt that we needed to ensure that we didn’t make taking on an allotment prohibitively expensive.

**6. Inspection processes**

SM (Eastbrook) had sent an email to the Allotment Officer and the BHAF expressing his concern that the time of his initial inspection to the final inspection was nearly 20 weeks. He is concerned that the process is taking far too long and that plots were sitting empty for far longer than was necessary. DC had estimated it only feasible for him to dedicate 2 days a week to inspections. SM was sympathetic to DC’s work commitments, but he felt that we needed to look at the whole process and see whether it can be sped up. The latest allotment rulebook states that there should be 8 weeks from the expiry date of the previous notice (*see below*)

*2.4 It is the tenant’s responsibility to keep the plot free of weeds that cause a nuisance to adjoining tenants. Where on inspection or as the result of complaints, a plot with weeds is identified the tenant will be sent a weed notice letter. A further inspection will be carried out up to 8 weeks after the notice period has expired, and if there are no improvements in cultivation a notice of termination will be sent.*

SM pointed out that Rule 2.4 stipulates the Council has the right to evict a tenant 28 days after them having received a first warning and them having failed to act on it. However he explained that he has inherited a system where they get a second letter and a further 28 days to rectify the situation.

Tina Huggins (North Neville) was concerned that by tightening the system still further we ran the risk of becoming too authoritarian and could end up evicting enthusiastic allotmenteers whose plots fall below generally accepted standards, even though their gardening methods have no negative impact on their neighbours.

Charlie Coverdale (Patcham Court) floated the idea that new tenants could pay a deposit that would be forfeited if their plots failed to pass inspection in that first year. This idea has been floated as part of the Strategy Review process, but to echo GM’s (City Parks) earlier statement, we need to ensure that the process of taking on an allotment doesn’t become unaffordable to those in the lowest income bracket.

Giuseppina Salamone (Moulsecoomb Estate) felt that the plots that some new tenants inherit are in such a poor state that it would be unfair to charge them a deposit. She suggested that new tenants get given an option – they can forgo a deposit, if they take on the clearing of their plots themselves. Alternatively, they could pay a deposit if they get their plot cleared by the council – this would be redeemable at the end of their tenancy, if they left their plot in the same good condition that inherited it in.

RN (Racehill) explained that now they have a strimmer they can offer their tenants three options: they can hire the strimmer, but it must be returned full with petrol. Alternatively the site reps will do the strimming for Racehill tenants at an as of yet unspecified price or the final option is to wait for the Allotment Maintenance Office to do this strimming work, but given the number of sites, this can take a long time.

DC explained that he’d recently conducted a time/ motion study and discovered that it’s not possible to do more than two/ three reasonably sized sites in a day. For every day spent on allotment, he needs a day in the office to do the resulting paperwork. Across the city this averages out at about 2 months per round of inspections, so he said he’s looking for any ideas from site reps/ BHAF as to how to streamline the inspection processes. He thought it may be an idea to have an established team of independent inspectors who could take on a percentage of the inspections, or conduct all but the final inspections. This team would continue to work directly with site reps (as DC currently does) and site reps would accompany them on their inspection rounds of their sites.

TH (North Neville) suggested that site reps could do the second inspections. DC explained that having someone independent undertaking second inspections, enables it to be a more objective assessment to be conducted. This safeguards potential personal conflicts between plot holders and site reps manifesting as biased inspections. In addition DC explained that whilst some site reps felt sufficiently confident to deal with plot holders facing eviction face to face, many preferred not to have to expose themselves to possible intimidation and for this reason it was felt that this should be done by the Allotment Officer.

TH said that in actual fact she’d prefer to be able to deal with tenants directly, as all she can do once her initial inspection has been carried is refer tenants to the Allotment Officer. She would prefer to follow the procedure through to completion, or at least until the final inspection. Several other site reps felt similarly.

Liz Carpenter (Waverley Crescent) suggested that we look at how other councils carry out their inspections.

GN (Coldean) explained that this subject has been discussed many times over the years. He felt it needs to be a rolling program, and not fixed between the growing months of May to October.

CC (Patcham Court) explained that most people only work their plots over the summer months and that to be inspected over the winter would be unfair as their plots would not be at their best or reflect the level of work conducted on their plots over the rest of the year. RH explained that it was common practise to let weeds grow up on fallow beds over the winter, to be dug in before flowering in the spring.

Mr Carpenter (Waverley Crescent) suggested that site reps could send in photos of plots. That could save DC having to actually visit sites. The problem being not everyone has a camera of sufficient quality to do this effectively.

Jacob Nowinski (Whitehawk) said that he felt the inspection process has worked well this year. Most site reps were in agreement that concentrating on the worst 10-15% of plots has been successful.

SL (BHAF) enquired whether the proposed ‘inspection team’ do the second or third inspection? He went on to explain that under Tim Read at the time of the last Strategy Review, it was understood that site reps would be taking on a more proactive role. However, some site reps felt that they didn’t want to take on second inspections as they felt uncomfortable with being the figure of authority. (See above.)

RH (Moulscoomb Estate) suggested that site reps could inspect sites other than their own, this would make it fairer. RH suggested that competitions and warning letters all happen simultaneously.

RN (Racehill) said that he warns tenants (on site or with a phone call) that they are about to get a second inspection, so they are forewarned. RH explained that he thought this was the sentiment behind the Weald Traffic Light System and that forewarning tenants that they are likely to fail an inspection process before they happen has worked well on other sites, notably Roedale Valley.

GS (Moulscoomb Estate) felt that inspections should only be carried out in the summer/ growing months. She felt that leaving plots fallow was an acceptable organic growing technique.

SL felt the idea of ‘growing season’ was wrong. We should be growing all year round. He pulled the conversation back towards an inspection process. He raised the point that was made earlier about the second inspection being done by site reps from other sites. SL asked for a show of hands from those present as to whom, in principle, would be interested in making up this proposed ‘independent inspection team’. About 8 – 10 people were interested. There was enough interest to look into this idea in more detail. In the meanwhile DC hoped that site reps would contact him directly if they had any other ideas as to how to speed up the process.

**7. Strategy Survey**

RH asked whether everyone knew there was an Allotment Strategy Survey in progress. Most Site Reps had received laminated notices from DC to put up on their gates, in order to alert all those tenants without email that there is a survey in progress and that they could either phone in to be sent a paper copy or receive one directly from their site rep. Unfortunately it subsequently turns out that there was a misunderstanding at the printers and the hard copies have not yet been received by DC for distribution to the site reps. These should now be received by DC on Monday 23rd September.

Unfortunately it transpired that some site reps have not received their notices for the gates and therefore the following sites have been missed.

Craven Vale / Whitehawk Hill (lost in post)

Moulsecoomb Estate (delayed in post but now displayed)

Walpole Road (received, displayed, removed by persons unknown)

Subsequent discussion with Vic Borrill (Food Partnership) who’s overseeing the administration of the survey process has agreed to extend the submission deadline for these sites for an additional two weeks to ensure that everyone is given ample opportunity to fill out a survey.

**8. Whitehawk Allotment Association**

Jane Hawkins (Craven Vale) expressed concern about the manner GJ has gone about trying to set up an Allotment Association at Whitehawk. She had raised similar concerns at the last site rep Meeting. She and the other site reps from Whitehawk/ Craven Vale explained that they were interested in the principle and potential benefits of having an Association, and had offered to assist GJ in establishing one but wanted to ensure that it was done in an open and democratic fashion and that all plot holders were involved in the process

Allan Brown (BHAF) explained that the BHAF, as well as providing a range of sample constitutions for the purpose, have established a simple guideline of basic requirements that all fledgling associations would have to adhere to if they were to be officially recognised and federated to the BHAF. He also explained that GJ has made several attempts to get an Association up and running and Whitehawk/ Craven Vale and was simply acting for the best interests of these sites.

It was agreed that if this was to happen we would all have to work together – the BHAF/ BHCC / Whitehawk Food Project/ GJ and the site reps – and ensure that it was done in an open and organised fashion. Emails sent to all plot-holders/ notices on gates etc. and a preliminary meeting arranged. In general there was a positive feeling towards setting up and Association and the benefits that having one may bring to the site.

There was a brief discussion about possible conflicts of interest between being a site rep and being involved in an Association. DC said that at Moulscoomb the site reps are voted in through the Association.

**9. Allotments Officer. David Cooper**

Maintenance – we’ve been fortunate to use the Community Payback Team quite extensively this year. We actually had them for 7 successive Wednesdays and as a result a lot of good clearing work was done.

Water will be turned off at the beginning of November.

Allotment Watch is a work in progress. Monthly meetings are taking place on the first Monday of every month. There is a meeting tabled with the fire service in order to look at Allotment arson. DC said he was pleased to see that some strong relationships developing between site reps and their local PSCOs.

Jane Hawkins (Craven Vale) asked whether the fire service could be given keys so they could access the site. JG (Whitehawk) explained that a key has been given to them already, but they don’t always have the time to locate them.

RN (Racehill) explained that their local PSCO raised a sum of £250 for the site for additional security but felt that the Fed failed to properly thank her for her efforts. RH said he would look into this and ensure that the PSCO is properly thanked.

DC reported Race Hill plot holders had been emailed to ask how they felt the money should be sent to improve site security.

**10. Site News**

CJ (Walpole Road) said that some tenants on their site have been using infrared cameras. RH explained that the Fed is investing in an infrared camera that alerts people by mobile phone. It was also explained that the police have a camera and pole that can be set up in areas of high crime/ vandalism

**11. AOB**

None.

**12. Date of Next Meeting**

January 2014 – exact date tba. *(Meeting ended at 9.00pm)*