

SELF MANAGEMENT FOR ALLOTMENTS:

What Would it mean?

A largely personal view from Russ Howarth.

The National Society for Allotment and Leisure Gardens (NSALG) sent a “mentor” to speak to the Brighton Strategy Development Group. He made a presentation about different levels of possible self management.

[HEALTH WARNING: Brighton Council, along with many local authorities, is a member of the NSALG and pays a substantial fee for the privilege. We should not assume that the Society is “on our side” if we believe there are “sides” to be on.]

The NSALG identify 3 levels of self management, though they would agree that there are different degrees within and between the levels. I’ll put their words in straight typeface and my opinions in italics.

Level 1

There is a site representative who liaises with the allotment authority and the association/plot-holders informally accept responsibility for minor maintenance works.

The association promotes good gardening and sustainable use of plots on the site, they may administer the waiting list.

There might be a mechanism by which the association/plot-holders or site representatives can be consulted on capital expenditure and repairs by the allotment authority.

There is no written devolved management agreement between the association/plot-holder and the allotment authority and no financial responsibilities.

This is more or less what we’ve got except that few sites have associations so it’s individuals who undertake minor maintenance and administer the waiting list. If the Allotment Service had to do all the lettings and inspections themselves, promote good gardening, and inspect the sites more regularly to identify maintenance needs and carry out all minor maintenance they’d need more and better paid staff.

Level 2

The association accepts formal responsibility for a range of duties, which are likely to include.

Collecting rents on behalf of the landlord,

Administering the waiting list, allocate plots and support new tenants

To raise funds and administer the finance allocated by the landlord.

Routine maintenance and to take responsibility for water bills

Financial agreements release a proportion of rental income for this purpose, but leave the local authority to carry out major works and undertake all legal formalities.

A written devolved management agreement or license between the association and the allotment authority is held.

This model requires a formal constitution to establish responsibilities and obligations it will also require a bank account and proper system of cash control and management.

This is a major leap and I don't think the NSALG would disagree that there are in-between positions. For instance it makes no sense in a modern age for allotment societies to collect rents. This level of self-management would (if every site adopted it) mean the redeployment of the operatives. [That's council speak for redundancies of course. The individual would still have jobs but they'd be taking over from somebody who leaves and isn't otherwise replaced]. I worry that some things would be even worse when it came to evicting anti-social tenants. Any society that felt forced to do this might get even less support from the council simply because of the costs of a legal challenge. Some site reps who are frustrated with the way the maintenance team operate might like to have their portion of the maintenance team costs paid in cash so that they could hire in their own sub-contractors. (We are assured that the maintenance team would be re-assigned to other duties rather than lose hours of work.) If we took on responsibility for our own water bills we may be more effective than the Council in getting leaks dealt with by Southern Water.

Level 3

The allotment association leases the site from the council, arranges tenancy agreements, collects rents and reinvests revenue (which it manages) on maintenance, repair and capital items.

Depending upon the term of the lease, plot-holders may become the tenants of the association rather than of the local authority. The local authority retains defined oversight and strategic functions.

A written devolved management agreement between the association and the allotment authority is held.

This model needs a substantial investment from the council initially, as it is unlikely that the rental income will be sufficient to fund all future eventualities, especially if sites have become rundown.

Another option would be for the landlord to provide a support grant possibly in the form of a 25 year endowment. This is an expensive option to set up but can be an effective way to secure a good site for the future.

So the bigger sites are into big business deals here. Brighton Council would not charge us any serious rent to lease the site, though to make the legalities work they'd have to charge a

“peppercorn rent”, for example £1.00 a year¹. Our council are aware that no society, let alone individual site rep, could manage the financial responsibilities of: replacing gates and fences; repairing haulage ways; dealing with mature trees falling; etc. However the lease would have to be very carefully examined by a very pessimistic lawyer working exclusively on behalf of the relevant Allotment Society to make sure that the Society and its officers didn’t open themselves up to enormous liabilities. The legal issues with eviction of anti-social tenants would be worse still. Societies would have the right, even duty, to get rid of anti-social tenants. If somebody chose to take it to court the organisation could be bankrupted even it won the case. Any site operatives would be employed by the societies who managed the plots (possibly through a contract with the City Parks to provide this service). Even if all sites adopted this model I can’t see the Allotment Officer post going away.

End of quotes from NSALG.

So generally self-management means (personal opinion here):

- ⊖ Allotment holders no longer have a service of which they are simple customers; they have to make themselves aware of all the costs involved and participate in reducing them.
- ⊖ Allotment holders **have to** organise themselves into societies to manage the allotment service.
- ⊖ Eventually the Council will be able to avoid any responsibility for any rent rises. It would be your own society that raised your rent.
- ⊖ There would be incredibly complex legal arrangements around who was responsible for what and these would be subject to challenge in court. In the worst cases sites could be closed when legal costs became more than the site’s income.
- ⊖ Solicitors and Insurance companies would benefit enormously.

- ☺ Allotment holders would have to get involved in looking after their sites, conserving water, and dealing with waste.
- ☺ Allotmentees would know each other better, talk to each other more and learn to resolve conflicts rather than ignore them.
- ☺ Allotment societies could look for funding (Lottery fund grants etc) which the Council can’t apply for.
- ☺ Allotmentees could actually improve services without increasing the rent.
- ☺ Allotment sites could be secured by legally binding leaseholds which could never (OK never without a new and controversial Act of Parliament) be rescinded.

I don’t think my own society, could sensibly take on these levels of responsibility. I don’t foresee any massive move towards self-management happening within the period of the Allotment Strategy.

¹ Personally I love the notion of reviving the tradition of one corn of pepper being handed to the landlord every year.