

Bath & North East Somerset

Draft Minutes of the ALLOTMENTS FORUM

1st November 2011, Friends Meeting House, Bath

The Forum was attended by 21 members of B&NES Allotments Association, 3 people from the allotment waiting list, 3 other attendees, 4 councillors and 2 Council officers.

1. Election of Chair

Cllr. David Dixon elected as Chair (proposed by V. Williamson, seconded P. Andrews)

Cllr. Dixon explained that the Forum was being established as the result of a series of meetings between the Cabinet member for the Environment (Cllr. Dixon), senior officers and representatives of the Bath & North East Somerset Allotments Association. He introduced the two Council officers: John Crowther, Service Manager, Neighbourhood Services, and Graham Evans, Parks and Estates Manager.

2. Agreement to the Terms of Reference (TOR)

After introducing the TOR, Cllr. Dixon explained that additional expertise, could be co-opted onto the Forum as required. He would formally notify the Cabinet of the Forum's TOR.

The following enquiries were raised:

- (i) The Council's 'vision' for allotments: Cllr. Dixon said this would be developed via the Forum.
- (ii) The geographical remit of the Forum: the Allotments Association's Secretary explained that Bath citizens had been invited to the Forum because B&NES Council was responsible for allotments within the city. Allotments in the remainder of the B&NES area were the responsibility of town and parish councils. It was intended that the management plan should become a template for good allotment management for the wider B&NES community.
- (iii) The meaning of 'green infrastructure': Cllr. Dixon explained that in theory this could mean any green space, e.g. not tarmac-ed. The Green Infrastructure Strategy was being developed at the West of England administrative level. The protection of private gardens was controlled by Planning. G. Evans said that allotments currently fell within the Green Spaces Strategy, but V. Williamson suggested the way that allotments were currently addressed in the Strategy may no longer be appropriate.

Because of her concern about the breadth of the final bullet point of the TOR, G. Saunders proposed a revision to its wording, to read:

- Assist in the development of policies for Green Infrastructure, Waste Management, and Climate Change mitigation, *in respect of allotments*.

The amendment was approved by a majority. The revised TOR is attached as Appendix 1.

3. Allotments Management Plan

John Crowther introduced the draft management plan, which had been prepared by the Allotments Association, by saying that it was a useful and well-written document with a number of interesting ideas. Some of these had significant cost implications and he proposed the establishment of a joint council-allotment tenant working group to prioritise the different components of the management plan.

The Allotment Association's Chairman and other tenants' representatives expressed considerable concern that, despite the Association having been told at its meeting with Cllr. Dixon in September that the management plan had been accepted, they were now being informed that further detailed work was required. They queried what work officers had done on the management plan between March, when the plan was submitted, and September when it was accepted without the need for modification. Cllr. Dixon and J. Crowther emphasised that the content of the plan was accepted but that prioritisation of different elements was required to find and allocate the necessary funding.

J. Crowther said that there may be costs which need to be passed on to tenants in the form of rent increases. V. Williamson pointed out that the Association had objected formally to the proposal in the 2011-2012 budget presented to the Stronger and Safer Communities Panel for additional income from allotment rent increases, unless management was improved. The draft management plan includes the compilation of a management procedures manual; if written procedures do not exist, the cost should be borne by the Council, not allotment tenants. B. Thomason pointed out that not everything within the management plan had cost implications, as they were already being provided.

Cllr. Dixon asked that the working group on prioritisation of the management plan report back to the next Allotments Forum. In response to G. Saunders' concern that the process was not democratic, Cllr. Dixon said that the next Forum would consider the working party's recommendations and J. Crowther said that tenants would be consulted formally in writing. J. Wilkinson suggested that officers put this information on the site noticeboards, and Cllr. Dixon asked officers to discuss this at the first meeting of the working party.

A. Cowan proposed that the Forum accept the proposal that the working party be established, complete its work within six months and report back to the next Forum. It was seconded by V. Herridge and approved by a majority.

The working party will comprise: Pat Barry, John Crowther, Geoffrey Dart, Graham Evans, Gill Saunders and Bernard Thomason.

4. Allotments occupancy statistics

Graham Evans presented site occupancy figures (see Appendix 2), which indicated that 1,078 of the 1,108 plots were occupied. He said that the remaining 30 plots were currently under offer to new tenants. There were 630 individuals on the allotment waiting list.

Two site reps pointed out that the plot numbers for their sites were incorrect. G. Evans admitted that he only had 80% confidence in the figures he had presented and attributed the error-rate to the current software used for allotment administration. J. Crowther said that the Council needed site reps to

help them collect accurate information. V. Williamson pointed out that the statistics did not include the number of derelict plots and J. Lywood asked whether it would be necessary for the Council to wait until the next Forum before evicting tenants of uncultivated plots. G. Evans confirmed the Parks department does contact tenants both by telephone and by letter. J. Crowther confirmed that improved inspection and enforcement were part of the management plan. G. Evans said that the Council was proposing to increase the cultivation rate to 75% of the plot. As the cost to the Council of clearing a derelict plot was £260, Parks are offering these to new tenants rent-free for two years.

N. Madden said that a plot on Canal Gardens had been allocated to a new tenant even though the current tenant had not been informed that he was being evicted. A similar event had happened at Lower Common West. M. Maude, who is on the waiting list for a plot, suggested that, if the Council does not know plot occupancy accurately, there may well be vacant plots which are not being offered. S. Burrows said that, while site reps were happy to work with Parks staff to identify plots, poor allotment management has been the critical issue and the one which is easiest to correct. He suggested that the working group address this issue as a priority. P. Magrath asked why current Parks staff do not contact site reps, as previous staff used to do. A. Cowan said that the reason given by Parks staff for non-enforcement is that they have other, more pressing responsibilities. G. Evans responded that the sites are inspected every six weeks. He is going to propose that inspections are carried out more frequently in the Spring, when cultivation activity should be at its height, and less frequently in the summer when Parks staff would be happy to rely on site reps' assessments of cultivation.

Cllr. Dixon asked officers to work more closely with site reps, and asked the Allotments Association Secretary to ensure that Parks has an up-to-date list of site reps and their contact details.

4. More Plots for Bath Project

Graham Evans explained that the project was now 'approved to go forward', but that it still required Cabinet approval which he anticipated would be given. The project would re-start in April 2012, its budget being: construction £270,000, project management £34,000 and software/IT £7,000. A project board would be established, and the first meeting would be in January to ensure that the project starts on time in April. The total number of plots to be created has been increased from 200 to 230. To effect the project, allotment rents will increase by £4 in year 1 of the project, and another £4 in year 2. G. Evans confirmed that the project completion date was the summer of 2014, and that this would be achieved through the use of additional staff time.

When questioned about the availability of land, Cllr. Dixon explained that the main problem was acceptance of new allotment sites by neighbouring residents. P. Andrews asked how many of the proposed sites were recreational green space as opposed to unused land. Cllr. Symonds asked whether development on the MOD sites would include allotments, and Cllr. Veal asked about using Bathampton Meadows. One of the attendees suggested a site on Entry Hill known as 'Corporation Yard'. When asked by J. Wilkinson whether the Council would utilise the Community Infrastructure Levy scheme, Cllr. Dixon said he intended that would be the case.

Cllr. Dixon said that he would keep in regular contact with the Allotments Association about the project, and would report back to the next Allotments Forum.

6. Allotments budget out-turn report

Graham Evans presented the out-turn report for FY 2010-2011 (attached as Appendix 3). Under four cost centres (Premises, Supplies & Services, Recharge Expenditure and Trading Income), the report demonstrated that there was an excess of income from allotment rents (£27,994) over expenditure (£15,823) of £12,170. The expenditure figure did not include officer time (3.5 WTE) or operational costs, e.g. grass cutting, of £18,000.

B. Thomason asked whether the Council intended to recover the whole cost in future. Cllr. Dixon replied that it would not be reasonable to do so, as provision of allotments was a statutory requirement. J. Crowther said that he hoped the cost of officer time could be reduced in future by improved working practices with site reps.

P. Francis, using the example of High Common, queried the high cost of creating four new plots and was told that there could have been a number of explanations, including the possibility of contamination requiring treatment.

7. Any other business

i. Automatic membership of the Allotments Association

T. Baines proposed that membership of the Allotments Association should be automatic, as a condition of tenancy. Cllr. Dixon replied that there would be a number of implications, and that there would need to be an opt-out clause.

P. Francis had canvassed tenants to find out why they did not belong to the Association, and one of the reasons was that the Association was ineffective in generating action by Council officers. Cllr. Dixon hoped that the Forum would ensure that responsiveness was improved.

ii. Spring Flower Show

There was a request from the floor that the Council re-instate the Spring Flower Show. This idea was supported by Cllrs. Dixon and Veal. V. Williamson said that the Association had been pleased when it was cancelled because of the amount of officer time it took away from allotment management between January and June each year.

iii. Comparison with other cities' allotment standards

J. Lywood suggested that officers compare the standard of provision within Bath with other cities. G. Evans said that Bristol had higher standards of support for tenants but that they funded this through the sale of land. J. Crowther said that comparison with Bristol was unfair, because of the difference in size.

8. Date of next meeting

The next Allotments Forum will be held in six months' time.*
(* Request to improve acoustics for the next meeting, either by using a circular layout or amplification.)

APPENDIX 1

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Allotments Forum to meet twice a year.

It will be chaired by the Cabinet member with responsibility for the Environment.

Its members will include councillors (numbers in proportion to elected Council), officers, allotment tenant representatives and a representative from the allotment waiting list. Additional expertise may be co-opted onto the Forum.

The Forum will

- monitor and advise on allotment provision
- monitor and advise on the allotment budget and expenditure, and on future requirements for capital investment
- receive and consider management reports (analysis of plot occupancy rates, annual site reports and the complaints log, and any other reports identified as useful by the Forum)
- monitor the delivery of the Allotments Management Plan and fulfilment of the Council's vision for allotments
- consider methods of monitoring customer satisfaction [other authorities conduct regular customer satisfaction surveys]
- bring to the attention of the full Council issues of concern relating to allotment provision and management
- assist in the development of policies for Green Infrastructure, Waste Management, and Climate Change mitigation, in respect of allotments.

**APPENDIX 2
BATH CITY ALLOTMENTS OCCUPANCY RATES (November 2011)**

Bath city allotments

Allotment	Location	No. plots	No. Occupied	No. waiting	Years Waiting
Abbey View	Abbey View Gardens, Bath.	58	58	48	2.9
Avon Park	Avon Park, Bath	10	9	17	2.9
Bloomfield Road	Bloomfield Road, Bath	144	140	39	3.0
Brookfield Park	Eastfield Avenue, Bath	10	10	18	4.5
Canal Gardens	Lime Grove Gardens, Bath	41	39	46	3.0
Claremont Road	Claremont Road, Bath	50	50	106	5.0
Combe Down	Church Road, Bath	62	59	45	4.6
Corston View	Odd Down, Bath	18	18	2	0.6
Eastfield Avenue	Eastfield Avenue, Bath	21	21	14	2.8
Fairfield Park	Charlcombe View Road, Bath	50	49	73	3.7
Foxhill	Combe Down, Bath	10	10	4	1.2
Hampton Row (organic site)	Bathwick, Bath	11	11	26	3.1
High Common	Sion Hill, Bath	33	31	47	3.5
King Georges Road	Lansdown View, Bath	8	8	18	3.1
Larkhall	Charlcombe Lane, Bath	79	77	63	3.2
Lower Common East	Upper Bristol Road, Bath	142	134	119	3.0
Lower Common West (organic site)	Upper Bristol Road, Bath	54	54	55	2.9
Lyncombe Hill Farm	Alexandra Park, Bath	50	48	44	2.8
Lyncombe Vale	Lyncombe Vale Road, Bath	10	10	20	3.1
Mendip Gardens	Banwell Road, Bath	15	15	11	3.2
Monksdale Road	Monksdale Road, Bath	133	131	21	2.4
Moorfields Road	Moorfields Road, Bath	35	33	14	3.2
Ring Common Paddock	Cow Lane, Bath	64	63	93	4.1
TOTAL		1,108	1,078	943	

Applicants may request that their names are added to the waiting lists for their two nearest sites. This means that whilst the total of the 'no. waiting' column above is 943, there are only 630 individuals waiting for plots.

**APPENDIX 3
ALLOTMENTS BUDGET OUT-TURN REPORT 2010-2011**

Neighbourhood Environmental Services		Year to Date					Year End					
		Amount	Commitments	Actuals	Profited Budget	Variance	% Variance	Forecast	Annual Budget	Annual Variance	% Variance	ADV/FAV
March Yr End	Financial Year 2010-2011	£	£	£	£	£	%	£	£	£	%	
Premises Related H*		8,556	0	8,556	6,296	2,260	35.90%	10,691	6,296	4,395	69.81%	ADV
Supplies & Services L*		2,828	0	2,828	0	2,828		2,578	0	2,578		ADV
Recharge Expenditure R*		4,439	0	4,439	8,952	(4,513)	-50.41%	8,952	8,952	0	0.00%	ON TARGET
Trading Income Y*		(27,994)	0	(27,994)	(28,494)	500	-1.76%	(29,235)	(28,494)	(741)	2.60%	FAV
		0	0	(12,170)	(13,246)	1,076	-8.12%	(7,014)	(13,246)	6,232	-47.05%	ADV

Water charges	8,321
Plots available	1,100
Cost per plot	£7.56

Staff costs

Allotment officer	2 days per week
Allotment Admin	1 day per week
Management	1/2 day per week
Operational Team	£18,000