

ASHFORD ALLOTMENT SOCIETY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the Allotment Survey Review Meeting with Ashford Borough Council 3rd June 2015 followed by Committee Meeting, Committee Room 1, Civic Centre

Present	Mrs P Winston	Chairperson and Bybrook Cemetery
	Mr T Fagg	Cryol Road
	Mr G Button	Trading Store Bulk Buying Manager
	Ms G Puckett	Publicity Manager
	Ms V Lawson	Christchurch, Jemmett, William Road and Musgrove New
	Ms S Haste	Musgrove Farm
	Mr A Fraser	Locum Minute Secretary
	Steve Clements	National Allotment Society
	Eileen Law	Allotments Officer, Ashford Borough Council
	Julie Rogers	Head of Environmental & Customer Service, Ashford Borough Council
	Jonathan Longley	Environmental Contracts & Operations Manager, Ashford Borough Council
	Sally Sadler	Allotment Holder – Gas House Fields
	John Norman	Allotment Holder – William Road
	Patricia Mann	Allotment Holder – Westrees
	David Mann	Allotment Holder – Westrees
	Margaret Howard	Allotment Holder - Westrees
	Keith Howard	Allotment Holder – Repton
	Derek Mitchell	Member – William Road
	David Worsley	Allotment Holder – Westrees
	Karina Worsley	Allotment Holder – Westrees
	Jonathan Goodwin	Allotment Holder – Westrees
	Mark Barton	Allotment Holder – William Road
	Christine Daley	Allotment Holder – Musgrove Farm
	Colin Barling	Allotment Holder – William Road
	David Botting	Allotment Holder – William Road
	Jenny Botting	Allotment Holder – William Road
	David Stone	Allotment Holder – Burton Farm
	Sophia Hubball	Allotment Holder – Musgrove Farm
	A Symonds	Member – William Road
	W Charlton	Tenant – William Road
	L Bonarius	Member – Orion Way
Apologies	Carol Ridings	Secretary
	Mark Chandler	Burton Farm

1. Chairperson's Opening Welcome

The Chairperson opened the meeting with a warm welcome to representatives from Ashford Borough Council, to Mr Steve Clements from the National Allotment Society, to members of the Committee and to a number of allotment holders in the Ashford Borough who had chosen to attend this part of the meeting.

2. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

These were agreed as accurate and true pending a request by Ms Puckett to correct the previous Minutes (Meeting 11th February 2015) regarding how the Review was distributed. The Chairperson agreed to review the previous Minutes and will arrange with Carol Ridings to make any corrections as required.

3. Appointment of Trading Store Membership Secretary

The Chairperson was delighted to announce that subject to approval, Mr Alex Fraser will take-up the vacant role of Trading Store Membership Secretary and become a member of the Committee. This was proposed by Penny Winston, Seconded by Tony Fagg and was carried unanimously by the Committee.

The Chairperson also announced that Alex Fraser will take the Minutes for this meeting in Carol Riding's absence.

4. Chairperson's Opening Remarks

The Purpose of Tonight's Meeting

'I propose to take the Ashford Allotment Review Consultation Document as our first Agenda item and now seek the Committee's approval that under these circumstances, we allow 1 or 2 allotment tenants from each site to speak, either as an individual, or to represent their site in accordance with the Constitution, whereby members of the Society are welcome to attend meetings as observers, but they may not vote, and may not take part in discussions unless agreed by prior arrangement (with the steering committee). So I now propose a Motion to allow such members to give their views tonight on matters relating to the Review Consultation only, with a time limit of 2 minutes for each speaker'.

(This was Seconded by Geoff Button and the Motion was carried).

'We will now hear the Council response to the Review Consultation and listen carefully to the findings. At the end of the presentation each representative will make a comment regarding the survey'.

The Chairperson handed-over the meeting to Julie Rogers of Ashford Borough Council to present the response to the Allotment Review Consultation.

Ms Puckett immediately challenged the way the Survey had been distributed and claimed it was invalid, because a significant number of allotment holders had not received the survey paperwork by hard copy, or did not have e-mail and therefore the returns were not wholly representative.

The Chairperson suggested this could be better discussed after Julie Rogers had finished her presentation.

5. Response to the Allotment Review Consultation

The following salient points are an abstract from the comprehensive and detailed presentation given by Julie Rogers, Head of Environmental & Customer Service at Ashford Borough Council

- There has been no previous survey or review of allotments in the Ashford Borough for many years.

- The review was being conducted to consider: how to reduce costs, how to reduce vacant plots, high volumes of terminations at point of invoice (in arrears) and the impact on resources. Also to consider how to maximise tenant commitment and in turn maximise income potential.
- The policy of sending Invoices in arrears has never been reviewed.
- The aim of the Consultation was to present the views of allotment holders.
- Julie Rogers acknowledged that distribution of the Review Consultation forms was not as tenants had expected, but that the response was over 50% and by any marketing standard, any response over 10% was considered to be very good.
 - There were 274 responses to the survey.
 - The responses gave a very clear steer, and therefore considered to be a good and fair representation.
 - There was a large percentage of male respondents.
- Considerations to include maximising commitment from allotment plot holders, maximise income potential and consider if there is a desire to self-manage allotments.

- A review of the overall methodology will include ...
 - Benchmarking other Councils and how they manage allotments.
 - Costs per perch by other authorities vary.
 - Range of water charges.
 - Range of variable deposit schemes.
 - Review of allotment charges.
 - Cost reduction opportunities (direct and indirect).
 - Optimising Council staff time and reduction of admin burden.
 - Examine the policy for water usage (which currently creates a huge financial outlay).

- Fears displayed by tenants arising from press reports, hearsay and other sources are to be allayed and include
 - There would NOT be a 400% increase in rents.
 - There had been an unintended impression given in the Review Survey and this was regrettable.
 - Cost changes are a Council Cabinet decision and are not made by individual officers.
 - There is a Statutory responsibility to provide allotments (but not to manage them).
 - There is no intention to sell allotments in order to build houses.
 - There is no intention to withdraw water provision.

- Ashford Borough Council will work with the Committee to review how allotments could be managed more cost-effectively.

- A deposit scheme for new tenants would be explored.
 - A high number of respondents showed in favour.
 - Would show commitment from new tenants to retain their plots.
 - 10% of plots are relinquished with no income for the current year and no subsequent income until year-end following re-let.
 - There is a high admin burden & cost to manage these plots.

- A scheme of advance payment would be explored.
 - Strong number of respondents believe it should be considered.
 - Options for advance payment to be considered and discussed.
Ashford is believed to be the only Authority who collect allotment rents in arrears nationally, according to the South East National Allotment Society Rep.

- Plot rental (cost per perch) has increased from £4.00 to £5.00 over the last five years.
 - There is a need for balance and harmonisation with regards cost.
 - Options on how to implement to be considered and discussed.
 - Will need to review sites to ensure correct charges are being made against actual plot areas.

- Water charges featured strongly in the Review and in feedback comments.
 - Nobody wants water charges.
 - Abuse of water is well recognised.
 - Hosepipes/continuous use/sprinklers.
 - Abusers are known, to other tenants.
 - If water charges brought in, they must be fair.
 - Minority abusers could affect the majority.
 - £3,974.00 spent on water 2014/2015.
 - Explore water-saving options over and above water charges.
 - Consult other authorities/management groups to see what they do.

- Concessions on its own was considered to be a difficult and very emotive subject (if removed would you continue to rent ?).
 - 904 of 2670 perches have concessions (£4,520 loss of revenue).
 - There is an ongoing demand.
 - Consideration must be given to those who believe they are subsidising concessions.
 - There is no simple answer to the subject of concessions.
 - Points to consider are ...
 - Introduction of a gradual reduction of concessions, rather than carried out in 'one big bang'.
 - If allotments are 'free of charge', what is the value of having an allotment ?
 - Objective is to explore options regarding Concessions.

- Summary and Actions
 - There is a need to reduce Council costs and overheads.
 - Actions are required on how the budget can be reduced.
 - Working Group to be established mutually agreed representation between Ashford Borough Council and the Allotment Society.
 - Subject matter experts and tenants to be invited to join.
 - Must be based upon mutual trust and respect.
 - Agreement to be reached on how, what and when information is publicised.
 - No timescale but must aim for ASAP to form the working group.
 - Working Group to make their recommendations prior to the open meeting scheduled for July.

- Changes would be specifically designed to address the review criteria.
- Range of items to be explored: - Management Options, Deposit Schemes, Appropriate Pricing, Water Saving Options, Concessions Options, Cost/Overhead reduction.
- Recommendations to be presented to the Cabinet in October 2015.
 - Timetable required to implement any agreed changes.

Julie Rogers thanked all members present for their attention during her presentation and handed the meeting back to the Chairperson.

6. Survey Feedback Comments from Site Reps

The Chairperson then invited each Site Rep in turn to present comments received from their plot holders on the Consultation Review.

6.1 Musgrove Farm

- Sue reported that plot holders are not happy.
- Not all plot holders received review forms, with no chance to have their say.
- The wording which suggested a cost of £21.50 was of great concern.
- People would give up their plots.
- Those on benefits would suffer, so could there be a reduced increase ?
- New people should be charged in advance with a non-refundable deposit.

6.2 Cryol Road

- Comments received related mainly to water and the prospect of higher charges.
- Why pay for water when somebody else is using it.
- How would water be charged for ?
- Increased cost per perch as implied was a bit of a shock to plot holders. (10 perch plot averaged £66.00 across Kent).

6.3 Westrees

- Many plot holders worried about possible water charges.
- The £21.50 cost per perch was also causing great concern.
- Most plot holders would be willing to pay something.
- Some plot holders would give up their plots in the event of changes implied in the Review.

6.4 Henwood

- A lot of concern has been expressed by plot holders on rent rises and water.
- The expense of running an allotment plot could become untenable for some.
- The majority of plot holders would prefer water to be free.
- Concern that some plot holders would be subsidising others who over-use water.
- The 400% rent increase implied in the survey form would be too much.

6.5 Gas House Fields

- Stefan reported that he had spoken to a good percentage of plot holders.
- The survey document content had caused much concern.
- Plot holders on concession rate do however realise how much things cost.
- Plot holders believe we have to work together regarding costs.
- Stefan reported that there were lots of timewasters on his site who come for a short while, realise what's involved, then they disappear.

6.6 Christchurch, Jemmett, William Road and Musgrove New

- Vivienne reported that a fair number of plot holders had been spoken to.
- Plot holders were concerned about water charges.
- Were meter readings being taken ?
- Have the Council considered restricting usage by limiting water availability to 2 days per week or installing restricted taps ?
- Most plot holders agree that a deposit scheme would deter timewasters.
- On concessions, some plot holders would be happy to pay a percentage cost as per the 'Medway Scheme'.

6.7 Repton

- Plot holders do not like the idea of a price increase.

6.8 Burton Farm

A report received from Mark Chandler was read out *verbatim* by the Chairperson in his absence as follows ...

- The Council should have sent a copy of the survey in the post to all allotment holders, as many do not have computers and cannot surf the internet and many are retired.
- I have made copies of the survey and have been giving them out to as many people as I see, and explaining that this is only a consultation document.
- I have tried to reassure people that the Council will not be putting up fees to the extent that Question 4 showed, and have been reassured on this by Eileen Law, who I met yesterday for a site visit.
- Plot holders feel ...
 - All agree new plot holders should pay a deposit.
 - Retired allotmenters would be more than happy to pay a discounted annual fee.
 - A small increase to full paying allotmenters is understandable.
 - Fees should be collected in advance and not in arrears.
- In my opinion we should see what the findings are from the Consultation Survey and work with the Council in finding common ground that we can all agree on, and work together in promoting the outcome.

6.9 Orion Way

- A possible rent rise as implied in the survey was a major concern.
- It would be difficult to find a deposit and pay a year's rent in advance for some people.
- The prospect of water charges was also a major issue.

7. Contribution from Steve Clements (National Allotment Society)

The Chairperson invited Mr Steve Clements of the National Allotment Society to add his contribution and valuable experience to the meeting.

Steve Clements then contributed the following comments to the meeting

- Steve was not aware of anywhere else in the country offering totally free allotments.
 - A typical concession would be in the order of 50% for the first 10 perches, then full payment for any subsequent perches.
 - Only one member per family are eligible for the concession.

- Water is generally charged for elsewhere in the country.
 - Usually charged separately from the rent.
 - No concessions for water.
- Steve doesn't know anywhere else that takes rent in arrears.
 - Some pay in advance, in which case a deposit may not be necessary.
 - However, deposits are rare in Steve's experience.
- Ways need to be found to help Ashford Borough Council with costs.
 - For example, to take-on devolved management (this would reduce the need for Eileen to be out-and-about as much).
 - Evaluate the 'Guildford' model, where the devolvement of 14 sites (700 plots) has resulted in total self-management, whereby the plot holders themselves do everything.
- Specifically regarding concessions, it was necessary at this point to clarify OAP's and UB40's.

Steve Clements concluded his contribution by endorsing the proposal to form a working group, stating it would be a valuable and positive way to help Julie Rogers identify savings and subsequently implement ways of reducing costs.

Ms Puckett stated that there should be a willingness to work with the Council in order to reduce costs.

8. Summary by Julie Rogers (Ashford Borough Council)

Julie Rogers summarised the actions relating to the process going forward and subsequent timings

- Julie Rogers would like to form the Working Group by the end of June 2015 latest in order to present the Cabinet with a review paper.
- The progress and/or outcome of the Working Group can be presented at the Society's Open Meeting scheduled for July.
- The Cabinet meet monthly and work with a 2 month lead-time.
- There is an expectation to present a review paper to the Cabinet in September/October 2015, but there is an understanding this will not be rushed through.

There followed a question put to Julie Rogers relating to the 'Departmental Budget' figures as published on the Allotment Society website

8.1 Q. There appears to be a discrepancy regarding the rise in budget for Contract Management and other figures between the 2014/2015 & 2015/2016 budgets. There appears to be no obvious relationship.

A. Julie Rogers clarified this by presenting a slide of the actual costs to-date for 2014/2015, along with the proposed budget for 2015/2016. These were more up-to-date than those published on the Allotment Society website.

Each line of the budget was explained.

Detailed explanations were given for Eileen Law's function, the Finance Team function and why their cost seems high.

Julie also explained in detail how and why certain costs are re-charged between departments and how this was normal accounting procedure. Julie went on to explain that the cost sheet was essentially in two halves; and the Cabinet would be more interested in the 'top' half, not so much the departmental re-charges.

Julie also stated that it was important to reduce Eileen Law's portion of allotment admin time, to reduce those costs.

On behalf of the Council, Julie encouraged Steve Clements to become a member of the proposed Working Group to support the initiatives likely to arise and to bring along his extensive experience.

To conclude, Julie emphasised the importance of controlling the output of information, ensuring it is released with context, in order to avoid misinformation and possible scaremongering or unnecessary distress.

9. Questions from the Floor

There followed a number questions put to Julie Rogers relating to general matters arising from the Consultation Review

9.1 Q. Concern was raised regarding the distress caused to people who misinterpreted the content of the Consultation Review document. It was a shame that members of the Allotment Society were not used more to ensure greater representation.

A. Julie Rogers responded by stating that it was a Consultation, and that the response percentage was actually considered to be very good.

9.2 Q. There was an error in the Kentish Express press report, namely it stated 400 sites. In fact there are 400 plots.

A. Julie Rogers was aware of certain discrepancies, but had decided not to go back to the Press at this time.

9.3 Q. Could the Council give consideration to the 'Medway' model (Rochester Allotments), which has 4 sites and is largely self-managed. Salient points involved in the running of these sites are as follows

- Rent is paid up-front.
- Prospective plot holders are allocated a half-plot on a 3 month trial basis to 'prove' they can maintain it, after which they are offered the full plot. Should they fail to cultivate or maintain their half-plot, they lose it.
- Arrangements for the provision of water vary between sites, for example on one site, the 'top half' receive a water supply for 2 days per week. The 'bottom half' have dip tanks every 50 yards and have flow-controlled taps.
- If the water usage target is exceeded, the extra charge is passed-on to plot holders.
- Volunteers keep paths and common areas clean and tidy and they mow the grass.
- Medway Council do all the admin and plot holders manage the sites.
- Raised beds are available for people who cannot manage full plots (these are very popular).

A. Julie Rogers suggested this as an ideal model of partial self-management and that the member with knowledge and experience of the Rochester model should be invited to become a member of the Working Group.

Note: Information on the self-management of these sites is available on the 'Rochester Allotments' website and members were encouraged to take a look.

9.4 Q. Why are invoices raised end of February/beginning of March and not in October as a number of other Local Authorities in the UK ?

A. Eileen Law explained that Invoices are put out at the end of February because that date aligns with the end-of-year financial accounting period for Ashford Borough Council, but this can be reviewed by the Working Group.

10. AOB

10.1 Brian Stamp requested that all communications such as the Consultation Review should be sent out by e-mail or post. This would have ensured that all plot holders received a copy.

This point was acknowledged by the Council.

10.2 Jonathan Goodwin asked how a deposit scheme could reduce admin costs ?

Julie Rogers explained that a deposit scheme shows commitment up-front and would tend to reduce the number of timewasters. A single payment up-front is less costly to administer than the present system of allocating a plot, waiting a year for any income, risking a mid-term relinquishment, chasing for non-cultivation if that happens unannounced, etc. etc., all of which consumes admin time for no income.

10.3 Margaret Howard requested that reference be given to the survey distribution in the Cabinet report with a breakdown of how the survey was conducted and promoted. Julie Rogers agreed that she would include this in the Cabinet report

10.4 Margaret Howard enquired where does it states that costs have to be recovered by the Council ?

Julie Rogers promised to make enquiries and revert with an answer at the next meeting.

10.5 Tony Fagg made a general point to the meeting that every site has a notice board and that notices had been posted regarding the survey and this meeting. It could be that plot holders did not read these notices or were not advised by their site rep.

11. Conclusion

At that point the Chairperson thanked all who had contributed to this part of the meeting and invited everybody present to attend the Open Meeting to be scheduled on a date to be announced towards the end of July.

That was the end of the Consultation Review Meeting. Plot holders who attended this part of the meeting then left the Committee Room and matters proceeded to the normal Committee business.