

**PARKS AND COUNTRYSIDE SERVICES
COMMUNITY SERVICES TEAM
ALLOTMENT ADVISORY GROUP
Minutes of Meeting**

**Wednesday 27th July 2022, 6-8pm
Town Hall/Zoom**

Present:

**Councillor Brian Holmshaw (Chair)
Ceri Ashton, Allotments Manager
Jane Bullimore, Allotment Officer (Minutes)
Rowan Longhurst, Countryside Service Manager
Phil Webster, Sheffield Allotment Federation
Charlie Smith, Parson Cross Allotments
Michael Jordan, Sheffield Allotment Federation
Rob Hawkins, Sheffield Allotment Federation
Michael Booth, Moss Way Allotment Society
Lee Vallett, Roscoe Plantation and Rivelin Valley Allotment Society
Andy Millman, Archer Lane Allotment Society
Alec Kokinis, Hangingwater Allotment Association
Paul Jordan, Crookes Quarry Allotment Society
Lovene Rhule, Sheffield Allotment Federation
Kenneth Webstone, Moss Way Allotment Society
Ann Marshall, Woodseats Allotment Society
Roger Haigh, Highcliffe Allotment Society
Stephen Hyde, Moss Way Allotment Society
David Marshall, Roscoe Plantation and Allotment Society
Dave Martin, Roscoe Plantation
Dan Bilton, Walkley Bank Allotment Society
Catherine Marshall-Marsden, Manor Allotments
Tony Mays, Rustlings Road
Steve Marples, Hagg House Allotment Society
Councillor Barbara Masters, Ecclesall Councillor
Councillor Cliff Woodcraft**

ITEM	DETAIL	ACTION
1.	<p>Introduction</p> <p>Councillor Brian Holmshaw introduced the meeting and explained that he is the current Chair of the Allotment Advisory Group (in his second year). He enjoys the role.</p>	
2.	<p>Apologies for Absence</p> <p>Councillor Marianne Elliott</p>	

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3.	<p>Minutes and Matters Arising</p> <p>Attendees introduced themselves</p> <p>Minutes from March meeting agreed as a true record.</p>	
4.	<p>Annual Report</p> <p>Ceri presented the Annual Report which had been circulated prior to the meeting.</p> <p>Questions were taken. Steve Marples asked about the lockdown period and asked if we would be better prepared if there was a future one. Ceri said yes, as the necessary technology is in place now, but explained that a lot of the backlog of work had been caused by restrictions on what tasks officers could undertake due to Covid-19 restrictions, i.e. only undertaking essential journeys. Michael Booth asked if the staff are still working from home. Ceri said it is a mix at the moment and will be a hybrid in future. We are much better equipped to work from home than we were previously. Dave from Roscoe Plantation asked if society reps can go round a site and take note of plots of concern. Ceri replied that this can be helpful, but better still is for society representatives to accompany officers during site inspections (if possible, if schedules permit) as the societies are often aware of individuals' circumstances when the office may not be.</p> <p>Regarding staffing Councillor Holmshaw said there was continuity and stability in the team. Steve Marples asked if costs were less during pandemic, and had an underspend been carried over. Ceri explained that there had not been an underspend. A new database was purchased which is web-based and can be accessed securely from home (and was essential, as the old version was at risk of stopping working entirely due to Windows updates). A major fencing project had been completed at Woodseats allotments.</p> <p>Andy Millman asked about potential use of drones for inspections. Ceri said unlikely to be used for that purpose due to cost/ legal constraints. Michael Jordan felt it would be a waste of money. Ceri said if drones were to be used in future it would be in exceptional cases.</p> <p>Ceri ran through major projects listed in report. Michael said there were concerns with surfacing at Woodseats. Ceri said she would speak to Caroline (who looks after the site).</p>	<p>All</p>

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	<p>Steve Marles said societies would like notice of flailing to avoid damage. Ceri said we can accommodate where we can. Our contractor can probably provide rough timescales but we don't have a lot of notice. Steve asked if societies can appoint contractors. Ceri explained that contractors working on behalf of SCC have to have met our criteria (insurance, safe systems of work etc). If sites were under self-management then societies could appoint their own contractors, but as landowners SCC would probably still have some stipulations. It was agreed that Self-Management should be a future agenda item. In the meantime, if people know of good contractors who offer good value for money, please pass their details on to the officers, and we will check whether they are already SCC contractors, or whether they could be in the future. Rowan explained that a broader pool would be really helpful as costs for all types of site maintenance are escalating, and many of our regular contractors are extremely busy.</p> <p>Ceri talked through numbers of Notices to Quit issued for non-payment. She appealed for help from Societies to help encourage tenants to pay on time, or to help us understand what the barriers are, since dealing with late payments takes up a great deal of time, at a time when the officers should be focussing on other things like site inspections. Charlie from Parson Cross asked why smaller amounts can't be collected by direct debit. Ceri explained that the amount is set by the Council's Finance Team and is currently only for amounts over £85, because it isn't financially viable to collect small amounts by direct debit.</p> <p>Michael Booth queried low NTQ non cultivation figures. Ceri explained that the team had gone in more softly with the inspections in 2021 because the pandemic was still having a major impact on many people's lives, but that the figures for 2022/23 would be far far higher, with very many Notices to Quit having been issued already.</p> <p>Charlie asked about other ways to get plots strimmed. Societies have helped in some instances and the Probation Service have done a lot of work for us but can't be everywhere. Checks are required where they use power tools.</p> <p>Ceri asked Societies to send through their comments re aspirations for next year. Steve Marples said he had sent through information for Hagg House.</p>	

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5.	<p>Michael Jordan queried progress on the Information Sharing Agreement. Ceri explained that it had been sent to Hagg House allotment society, who had requested some changes, which were being looked at.</p> <p>Alec Kokinis asked what the exclusion list was. Ceri explained that people are excluded from applying for a plot for one year after losing a tenancy via a Notice to Quit for non-payment, and must clear all arrears before being offered another plot. People are excluded for one year after losing a plot through a non-cultivation NTQ. You can be excluded for up to 10 years for more serious breaches of tenancy.</p> <p>There was a discussion about availability of wood chippings – arborists can get money for chippings used for biomass now so they are more scarce.</p> <p>Rents 2024/2025</p> <p>Ceri explained that we need to look at rents for 2024/25 now because tenants need one year’s notice of rent, and changes to the decision-making processes. The information goes out in January/February but the decision now needs to be signed off by a committee of Councillors (formerly it was an individual executive member).</p> <p>Ceri presented a proposal that rents go up in line with inflation – an increase of 9.4%.</p> <p>Comments were invited. Michael Booth said he thinks the increase would mean losing a lot of tenants. Ceri asked if he could suggest any alternatives. Michael said he thought tenants would rather a reduction in the winter site improvements than an increase in rent. Michael Jordan shared this view. He said allotments served to subsidise costs for people on low incomes. Ceri said that the feedback from the group would be passed to the decision-makers encouraged societies to get back to her with their views; they could do so after the meeting if they needed time to think and consult with their members. The decision-making committee meets in September so comments would need to be made well in advance of then. The Federation can submit their comments to the Committee.</p> <p>Ann said that while no one wants increases she feels there is a need to be realistic and £200 for an allotment is still only £4 a week. She said people work their plots for a wide variety of reasons – including being part of a community and health benefits. She suggested we might look at having smaller plots</p>	

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	<p>such as quarter allotments so people can still afford to have a garden.</p> <p>Alec Kokinis questioned whether the council's process for setting the rents complied with the requirements of section 10 of the 1950 Allotments Act which specifies that an allotment should be let '<i>at such rent as a tenant may reasonably be expected to pay for the land</i>'. A High Court Judge in the 2014 case relating to allotment rents in Leeds had said that he could not see how rents could be set within the Act '<i>without some sort of valuation exercise</i>' and had specifically pointed to comparisons to be drawn from agricultural rents. Mr Kokinis observed that the current high rate of inflation was being very much driven by increases in energy costs which did not so much impact upon agricultural rents. Ceri responded that she would refer his question to the legal section.</p> <p>Steve Marples asked if an increase could be amended if inflation comes down. Ceri explained that if inflation came down in the future, future rent increases would be smaller, but it was unlikely that rents would actually decrease. There was a discussion around setting rents for longer periods rather than making decisions annually. This can be considered as part of the policy review (in the previous large consultation, it was clear that tenants preferred rent decisions to be made annually).</p>	CA
	<p>Any Other Business</p> <p>Ceri gave a progress update regarding CCTV. A suitable product for 'covert' applications and sites without lighting columns nearby is still being sought. Crookes Marsh Lane being prioritised as pilot (where lighting columns are present nearby). We are awaiting a final price.</p> <p>A query was raised regarding the speed of letting plots. Ceri explained that electronic tenancies should be available soon, which will speed things up considerably, as it is not uncommon for documents to go astray in the post, and a lot of time is spent reminding applicants to return their signed agreements.</p> <p>Phil Webster said that something needed to be done to improve occupancy at Roe Woods. Probation have cleared many plots, but the new tenants have still failed to cultivate them. Ceri said how disheartening it had been. Such a lot of work has been done by Probation, by Phil and by the office, but it just isn't translating into improvements on the ground (whereas at the nearby Parson Cross site, the improvement in the condition of the site is very noticeable). Offering those on the waiting list for Norwood the opportunity to take on a plot at Roe Woods instead has been successful in the past. This can be repeated provided that there is sufficient waiting list at Norwood. It was suggested</p>	

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	<p>that banners are used to advertise the fact that plots are available; on railings next to roads etc. Ceri agreed this should be tried.</p> <p>Steve Marples asked how things go on site improvements list. Ceri explained that here will be a discussion at next meeting. Projects can be suggested then, or in advance of the meeting.</p> <p>Ceri said she felt that the recent fire at Moss Way allotments needed to be mentioned. It is still not known how it actually started (but undoubtedly the hot dry weather was a significant factor).</p> <p>An update on the reivew of the policies, procedures, strategy, tenancy agreement and handbook was requested. Ceri responded that significant progress had been made earlier in the year, but that the project had been paused for the summer months while the team focussed on site inspections. Work on the project would resume soon.</p> <p>Burning – Michael Jordan asked about the potential of using a burning platform with a high chimney. Ceri said she would seek guidance from Enironmental Services. Concern was expressed about the fire hazard posed by dry material being stored on plots, because tenants are unable to dispose of it by burning in the summer months. Ceri said that this concern could be considered when the current policy is reviewed, and asked representatives to inform her of any significant immediate causes for concern.</p>	<p>CJ</p> <p>CA</p>
	<p>Date of next meeting</p> <p>Early September tbc</p>	