

UCKFIELD TOWN COUNCIL



Notes from the Allotment Conference held in the Weald Hall
Uckfield Civic Centre on Tuesday 26th July 2011 at 7.30 pm.

IN ATTENDANCE: Cllr. Mick Harker - Chairman of Allotment Working Group
Cllr. Sam Bryant – Allotment Working Group
Cllr. A. Whittaker – Allotment Working Group

88 Allotment Holders/residents and interested parties

Notes taken by Angela Paul, Administrative Officer

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Terry Morford, Paul Watson, Michael Cosham and Peter Selby.

Cllr. Harker welcomed everybody thanked them for attending and introduced the other councillors. He advised that the aims and reasons why the first conference had been arranged by Uckfield Town Council was to share with the allotment holders some of the issues the council had in providing the allotment service, to receive feedback from the tenants and to give them an opportunity to ask the Town Council any questions or to raise any queries.

Cllr. Harker advised that a significant sum of money had already been spent on new fencing, water pipes and on going work by the ground staff and whilst it demonstrated the council's support for allotments it was necessary to ensure that monies was spent wisely.

One of the most costly annual items was the charge for water but this would be discussed more fully later in the meeting.

Cllr.Harker advised that if the Councillors were unable to answer any of the queries at the meeting they would get back to residents with a reply after the meeting.

ALLOTMENT SIZES AND CHARGES

Cllr. Harker advised that due to a long allotment waiting list of over one hundred people and the growing interest in having an allotment the Town Council made a decision last year to look at various way of increasing the number of plots available and the best way of utilising the land already in the ownership of the Town Council. It was found that there was a huge range of plot sizes and also a number of under-used plots. With the creation of new allotments at both Ridgewood and Framfield Road and by dividing some of the large plots in half, it has been possible to reduce the waiting list. It currently stands at 35 but there is a constant demand for allotments and there is already an increased demand for Ridgewood due to all the new housing at that part of the town.

The variation in plot sizes and the way they are charged is not fair and equitable with an existing 10 rod plot varying between 5 rods and 20 rods all currently charged at the annual rate of £30.00 and an existing 5 rod plot varying between 3 rods and 10 rods and charged £15.00.

It is proposed by the council to measure each of the plots and establish a fairer way of charging. With this in mind the working group has looked at the charges of other local councils and Uckfield is the cheapest. Most councils only offer a maximum plot of 5 rods with the exception of Brighton & Hove but their maximum is 10 rods for a family plot. These councils measure and charge their plots in square meters which is a fairer way of charging.

A resident asked if only local people were included on the waiting list?

Cllr. Harker confirmed that only Uckfield residents were included and also were only able to register for one site.

An allotment holder stated that the Town Council owned lots of spare land why could that not be used rather than splitting up larger plots and also why some years ago some of the Ridgewood plots were taken away to provide the recreation ground/play area?

Cllr Harker advised that the Town Council did not have any areas of spare land and with hindsight perhaps the land at Ridgewood could have been utilised differently, but at the time there was not the interest in having an allotment. This is one of the reasons why there are some large plots because at the time the Town Council could not give allotments away as people were not interested in cultivating however, a few residents were happy to cultivate large areas.

Bob Sweetland, Ridgewood allotment holder stated that the main question was about the size and charging and he believed that the only fair way would be to charge by the square meter as there were so many various sizes of plots.

A resident agreed that whilst the current charges were very cheap compared to other councils, they felt that the services some of these councils offered was far better than the town council e.g. Crawley had better security with secure gates and more water points. They asked if the council was looking at ways of offering a better service?

Cllr. Harker agreed that in some councils the service could be considered better but balancing and establishing a better service and fair charging without incurring a very high cost to the council was always going to be a difficult task.

Mr. Ricketts, a West Park allotment holder asked if the council could measure and talk in square meters rather than rods as he along with many others did not know what a rod measured.

Cllr. Harker advised that a rod was historically a measure of land but agreed that in future it would be advisable to measure and charge in square meters.

A new allotment holder on the new Framfield Road site asked if all the plots had been allocated and also how had the anomaly of sizes of plots arisen?

Cllr. Harker confirmed that not all the plots had yet been allocated, some had not yet been offered as the council was waiting for the completion of the groundwork for the laying of the water pipes etc. and some plots had been offered but refused as being unsuitable or residents wanted to have an allotment on a specific site.

Cllr Harker advised that the Councillors were in the process of measuring all the individual plots and with regard to the varied plot sizes it was a problem that had arisen over many years perhaps by allotment holders either creating larger or smaller plots by narrowing or widening communal pathways or by dividing their plots with paths or erecting sheds or greenhouses. He said that it would be nice to be in a similar position to Crowborough Town Council with their new allotment site which they have been able to divide into equally sized plots but unfortunately there was no 'blank canvas' to work with in Uckfield.

Allotment Holder of FR44 asked if Councillors were aware that the land at Framfield Road from the newly created allotments down to the Allotment Association garage used to be allotments and why could that land not be utilised?

Cllr. Harker confirmed that the council was aware that in the past this area had been allotment land but it was now not very desirable as allotment plots and that years ago past tenants were only too happy to move sites as it was very steep and difficult to maintain.

Councillors were asked why land could not be terraced?

Cllr. Harker agreed that it would be possible to terrace the site but that it would be very costly, he advised that just to put water in at Bird in Eye and Framfield Road had cost approximately £4,000 it was therefore more cost effective to look at the other sites where plots were not being fully utilised and maintained and could be divided into manageable plots.

Cllr. Duncan Bennett, allotment holder at Bird in Eye wondered how many people offered a poorly maintained plot viewed the site and walked away due to being overwhelmed about amount of work that would have to be undertaken to bring plot into a maintained and cultivated state. He suggested that it would be an idea for the council to assist with the initial clear up prior to offering the site. Mr. Bennett was not aware that Bird in Eye required a new tap and wondered why an additional tap had not been installed instead at Ridgewood?

Cllr. Harker advised that 27 new plots had been created at Framfield Road, and that following the current recommended criteria for the number of taps per allotment sites it had been considered more cost effective to install the additional taps at Framfield Road and Bird in Eye at the same time. He confirmed that Ridgewood and West Park were also scheduled for future installation.

Allotment holder from FR45 asked if when measuring plots councillors would take account of large trees overhanging plots thereby reducing the cultivation area of a plot?

Cllr. Harker advised that councillors had not yet come to a conclusion regarding re-sizing of plots or charges but they will take into account and recognise the percentage of a plot that can be cultivated. It was possible that some tenants will pay more for ground rent and some less.

An allotment holder from RW23 advised that they had one of the larger plots and as a family had cultivated and maintained the plot for 60-80 years and now felt they were being victimised for having the larger plot and they would not want to see some of their plot taken away.

It was also noted by another Ridgewood allotment holder that some known vacant plots did not appear to have been offered or being maintained. Cllr. Harker advised that all the plots at Ridgewood had been offered/allocated but would look into why the particular plot mentioned was not being cultivated.

Cllr. Harker re-assured attendees that the council did not propose to take away or divide plots that were being properly cultivated but when plots became vacant or if they were not being maintained after discussion with the allotment holder they would be resized into manageable sizes. He also advised that the council was looking at the overall management of allotments and ways to strengthen the rules and regulations and in particular the possibility of having a trial period of three months when somebody takes on an allotment.

An allotment holder mentioned that they thought the current agreement said that notice could be given after four weeks if plot not maintained and Town Council take back.

Cllr. Harker again mentioned that the management and agreements were being looked at but did advise that in some cases people had very valid reasons for being unable to cultivate e.g. illness and that perhaps four weeks was not sufficient time but agreed that perhaps in the past the council had been too lenient.

WATER

Cllr. Harker advised that during the Working Group's investigations it was found that quite a few other councils did make an additional charge for water. The total metered water consumption for all Uckfield Town Council allotment sites for 2009 was 874,000 litres at a cost of £1200 approximately £7.20 per allotment. The council does recognise the need for water on the allotments and has commenced a programme of providing more water points to ease the problem of getting access to a source of water to all plots, for example Framfield Road, east of the hospital currently has one tap for 48 plots the council aims to provide 5. However there are also examples of abuse of use of water on some sites where hoses and sprinklers are left running all day and unattended. The new regulations will ban leaky hoses and watering with a sprinkler.

Mr. Ricketts asked if there was a breakdown of income and expenditure figures for each of the sites?

Cllr Harkers advised the breakdown of last available figures:-

Rent Received	Allotment site (plots)	Water Costs (Balance)
£510.00	West Park (21)	£227.14 (£283.00) = 10.8p per plot
£180.00	Bell Lane (9)	£113.16 (£67.00) = 12.55p per plot
£435.00	Ridgewood (42)	£393.10 (£42.00) = 9.35p per plot
£930.00	Framfield Road (48 +11)	£373.74 (£557.00) = 7.7p / 7.3p per plot
£375.00	Bird in Eye (46)	£170.79 (£205.00) = 3.69p per plot.

The Town Council has looked at various ways of managing the water including the use of water disc meters but it was felt that these would be too expensive. Consideration has been given to push taps with dip tanks, which are fine if allotments are adjacent to taps but arduous for others further way, the use of hose pipes to fill plot tanks via a locked tap and also a water surcharge possibly based on the square metrage of each plot. If a shed or greenhouse is on a site the use of water butts is to be promoted.

Some allotment holders expressed the view that dip tanks were not always successful and others suggested leaving the taps and charge for water on a pro rate basis per allotment site, but they would want some assurances that the bill would not escalate upwards without some form of control mechanism in place.

Cllr. D. Bennett raised the point that a quick fix to save water would be to ensure that the groundstaff checked and replaced washers on leaking taps quickly on the allotments as he had in the past had to

telephone the office to report a problem. He added that it was important that communication and dialog was maintained between the allotment holders and the council and one easy way would be for all allotment holders to join the Uckfield Allotment Association.

Nicola Bennett advised that she had looked at and compared water prices for 2008 and also that she had noted that there were a lot of fallow plots in 2008 and asked if they were going to be penalised because the town council had left plots fallow?

Cllr. Harker advised that the Town Council is not proposing to turn the water off but looking at better ways of conserving and managing the supply.

Bob Sweetland was glad to hear that at long last the Town Council was looking at the supply and maintenance of the water system.

Mr. Plowman from West Park allotments suggested that people should keep the possible water charge in perspective as the charge quoted of £7.20 per annum worked out at just 2p a day which he would gladly pay. He personally had not seen on West Park static hoses left on and he was quite sure that if a charge was introduced the plot holders on each of the sites would be able to police their sites and have a quite word should any wastage be seen.

Ken McHugh from Bell Lane allotments thought that allotment land within Uckfield had for many years been poorly managed by the council, allotments had been taken from The Drive for housing, from Bell Lane for the use of the supermarket and the fire station and recently at a Plans meeting it was proposed that the fire station should be moved to the allotment site. He also asked why the open space land between Rocks Park and West Park could not be used as he thought another 40/60 plots could be created.

D. Turner from Ridgewood asked the committee if they were aware that a local lady uses the tank at Ridgewood allotments to wash her dog, perhaps they could bear that in mind when choosing a water system.

A resident asked if the Town Council were splitting allotments into small plots if they had thought about charging less if sheds or greenhouse were installed with water butts as this would encourage people to conserve water?

Cllr. Harker agreed that quite a lot could be incorporated onto a small plot and it was a consideration.

Stuart Woodham advised that he had recently moved into the area when there was over a hundred people on the Town Council waiting list and that he had come from the Brighton and Hove area and that together with his occupation with a water company, he was very aware of the overhaul and radical views that Brighton & Hove had taken and introduced regarding the cultivation and management of their plots. The results were soon obvious and a vast improvement with many plots being better utilised.

He also advised that he had recently been allocated one of the new Framfield Road allotments but it had been extremely hard work to bring the plot into some form of cultivation and he felt that people did not appreciate the amount of hard work required with an allotment. He asked if all the newly created plots had been allocated as a number of the plots were not being worked and now going to seed and would the council let them go for another season and allow the weeds to seed without being cultivated?

Cllr Harker advised that most of the new plots had been offered and they would not be allowed to lay fallow and it was envisaged that with the more stringent regulations and management the situation would improve.

Mr. Phillips, from Framfield Road allotments advised that he had been on the waiting list for two years prior to being initially offered a plot on land that was supposed to have been cleared by contractors which still included seven tree stumps and a lot of brambles which would have taken years of hard work to create a suitably maintained allotment, he then had the opportunity to take on a slightly better plot which he accepted. Mr. Phillips asked why overgrown plots were not cleared and/or rotovated by the ground staff or contractors prior to being offered to new plot holders which would then enable them to have a greater chance at getting a plot to suitable cultivation rather than being a very daunting task and the plot once again not maintained and left to go to seed?

Mr Knight RW21B advised that he took on his allotment six years ago which was in a pretty sore state but he was advised by the Town Council that it could be rotovated for a charge this however, was not done and it took two years to get the plot to a good state of cultivation and he felt more could be done to assist new occupiers with the very overgrown plots.

An allotment holder from Ridgewood agreed that it made sense to have a probation period of three or six months and also perhaps other allotment holders could also assist and encourage any new tenants if they noticed they were struggling so they did not lose the allotment plot during the probation period.

Bob Sweetland asked how many tenants of Ridgewood allotments were at the meeting and asked how they would feel if they had more involvement in the running of their site? Some people thought it was a good idea but others suggested that perhaps they should support and become members of the Uckfield Allotment and Cottage Gardeners Association.

Cllr. Harker expressed concerns about how workable having individual groups would be and stated that it would be preferable to work with one group e.g. the Allotment Association. However, he also added that he would hope that should a particular problem arise that individuals would contact the Town Council immediately.

Ken Thompson, Treasurer for Uckfield Allotment and Cottage Gardeners Association informed the conference that the association had been actively running since 1937 and was always looking for more members. He advised that the association in recent years had been pro-active in writing to the Town Council and he thought that over a period of time they had sent at least twelve letters regarding the provision of extra taps at Ridgewood including offering to assist with the laying of pipe and they had not really had a satisfactory answer. The members do try to promote the association and its aims and a newsletter is now available.

Cllr. Harker advised that the Town Council would be happy to include a copy of the association's newsletter when sending out annual invoices in September.

Mr. Ricketts appreciated that the water usage is variable on each site and agreed with other allotment holders that each site should pay for the water used providing that usage was monitored properly and the information put on the allotment notice boards. He suggested that each site should have a site representative who would assist with the management of water usage. Mr. Ricketts also had concerns about leaking taps as from personal experience he was very aware of how much water can

be lost, he asked the Working Group if any overnight checks were made? He also made the point that he was not in favour of dip tanks.

One allotment holder asked if it was fair to charge those people who do harvest rain water when others waste the water, was the possibility of rain water harvesting on a larger scale being looked into?

Cllr. Harker advised that the Town Council was currently working on rain water harvesting system for Victoria Pavilion and it was not a cheap option and not a financial viable option for allotments. However, he did agree that more should be done to raise awareness to reduce the waste of water which was a valuable resource and the Town Council hoped that with clear guidance, and the banning of sprinkles this would be achieved.

REGULATIONS

Cllr. Harker briefly outlined the need for the Town Council to review the regulations as it was necessary to look at the problems with unmanaged plots, weed control and the management of these areas, the use of water and sprinklers as already fully discussed, structures on sites i.e. poly tunnels, greenhouses, and unsafe sheds either inherited by plot holders or allowed to get unsafe. Following a recent inspection it had been noted that there were some sheds in very bad state of repair, some precariously standing on bricks and even a Nissan hut, all of which was totally unacceptable, and had clear health & safety implications to allotment users and would not be allowed in future. He confirmed that the Town Council will be contacting individual plot holders regarding the unsafe structures on their plots.

The management of communal access paths will also be looked at as some paths have got smaller as plot holders 'expand' their plots stopping grass mowing being carried out effectively, in particular everybody should be working together to keep paths clear of rubbish etc. Cllr. Harker advised that recently whilst groundstaff were cutting a communal path a piece of metal pipe had been left on the long grass and damaged the mower which had cost £400.00 to repair.

Councillors will also look at the way the land is used and, whilst recognising the therapeutic nature of allotment gardening and allowing plot holders to have areas with perhaps a seat where they can sit and enjoy the view, they will want to look at types and how many trees, hedges etc. are growing on plots.

BONFIRES, DOGS AND GREEN WASTE

Dogs

An allotment holder asked if the Town Council was considering banning dogs from allotment sites? Another allotment holder advised that dogs were a particular problem at Bird in Eye and Ridgewood, although Bird in Eye was not quite so bad at present due to the locked gate from Keld Avenue.

Councillors advised that they were not considering banning dogs as long as they were kept under on a lead and under control, loose dogs were not acceptable.

Green Waste

Cllr Harker confirmed that there had been a request to provide communal bins on sites for Green waste but the council had decided that the provision of these bins would be extremely expensive and most green waste can be composted. The council did want to encourage individuals to dispose of rubbish responsibly but most people had individual green bins at home or, if suitable woody waste, to have a bonfire.

Bonfires

There are no by-laws banning bonfires on sites but ideally an incinerator should be used and consideration given to neighbours and about the type of materials burnt.

COMMUNICATIONS

Cllr. Harker asked the attendees if they thought the conference was a good idea and if there should be an annual meeting. Also that consideration would be given to the possibility of having site representatives, however he was in favour of liaising and working with the Allotment Association as a group rather than lots of individuals but the Town Council was always willing to communicate with residents.

Most people agreed that it was a good idea and they would be interested in an annual conference.

Mr. Sweetland thought representatives could be helpful and mentioned that for example one particular problem at Ridgewood was the rabbits at Millenium Green.

A resident expressed the opinion that he knew several people who had written to the town council and had not received a reply, one person wrote reference the water being turned on during the winter as he had some chickens on his plot but had not had a reply.

Cllr. Harker said he was surprised to hear that replies had not been received especially regarding the water required for the chickens as he was aware of the request being discussed at a Council meeting and a decision taken regarding the water. The Town Council, usually has a good record for acknowledging correspondence.

A resident expressed concerns about representatives being appointed for individual sites as she thought some people would not appreciate being told what to do and rules laid down perhaps by somebody new to a site.

Duncan Bennett advised that as a member of the Allotment Association he would favour communication between the Association members and the Town Council, the association was a useful campaign group who had many contacts and much experience.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

An allotment holder from Bell Lane advised that the site had the worst security of all the sites with people breaking into sheds, damaging plots and turning on water and asked if consideration could be given to making the site more secure.

An allotment holder from Framfield Road made the comment that when all the hedgerow had been removed the mess had not been cleared up properly and they asked what the cost had been for the new fence it was also felt that the new fence was not tall enough and should have been double the height as at its present height it was unlikely to keep anything out. They also asked if some of the older fencing by the hospital could be repaired.

Some members of the association gave their support and urged more allotment holders to join the association which would enable all allotment holders to have a strong voice if there was a major problem.

Hilary Flockhart, Editor of the association newsletter asked why the association had not been asked by the Town Council for agenda items for the conference.

Cllr. Harker advised that this was the first conference and was primarily to inform allotment holders of the Town Council's plans for updating the rules and regulations and changes to the way rents were calculated. However, should it be agreed to have further conferences then the Allotment Association would be invited to submit agenda items.

Nicola Bennett asked when allotment holders would expect to be advised of the increased charges?

Cllr. Harker advised that he did not envisage a large increase in the ground element of rent, he reiterated that the Town Council was not looking to make a profit but looking to cover costs and to have fair and equitable charges for the size of a plot, the council realised that there is a social element to having an allotment but it must also cover its costs.

Mr. Ricketts thought a representative would be a good idea, in the past he had contacted the Town Council to ask for a key to the bollard that prevents vehicle access to West Park allotments for the unloading of materials etc. and he had received a blunt reply from the Town Council advising that ground staff could open barrier when access required, which he found to be curt and offensive indicating that he could not be trusted with a key especially as he later found out that the football club had a key. *(After clarification the key is only held by the Town Council).*

With regard to security and access onto sites the suggestion was made that a simple combination lock could be used and only those who should have access would know the number.

Councillors advised that combination locks had been considered but that problems could sometimes be caused by too many people knowing the number and locks being lost.

Mr. Ricketts stated that he was sure that if a lock was found to be compromised that a whip round could be had for a replacement lock.

Mrs Sweetland asked why Ridgewood did not have a new access gate?

Cllr. Harker advised that the general upkeep of all sites was being monitored.

Mrs Turner asked why the land at Ridgewood where Ridgewood Nursing Home had been demolished could not be used for community allotment land?

Cllr. Harker advised that the land was owned by East Sussex County Council and that there was planning permission for a replacement home.

Mr. Jones said that many of the allotment holders wondered how with the varying size of plots the winners of the allotment competition are decided? He also thanked the council for organising the event.

Cllr. Harker confirmed that this year he had accompanied the independent judge round the sites, the judge was an experienced person who judged allotments all over Rother and Wealden areas and he used a long template list from which he scored points for the number of vegetables/flowers/fruit trees being cultivated and how well maintained the plot is. It was generally agreed that the larger allotment does have an advantage and in future it is probable that there will be winners for larger and smaller allotments.

There being no more questions the conference closed at 9.15pm.