



MINUTES OF THE ALLOTMENT CONFERENCE

Wednesday 10 November 2021 in the Weald Hall, Civic Centre.

In attendance: Councillor. K. Bedwell
Councillor. B. Cox
Councillor. J. Edwards
Councillor. S. Mayhew

32 members of the public
Councillor D. French
Holly Goring, Town Clerk
Rachel Newton, Senior Administrative Officer
(Minutes taken by Rachel Newton)

1.0 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Town Clerk welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced members on the top table from the Allotment Working Group which included Cllr. S. Mayhew (Chair of the Environment & Leisure Committee and New Town Ward), Cllr. K. Bedwell (Ridgewood), Cllr. B. Cox (New Town) and Cllr. J. Edwards (Ridgewood). The Town Clerk explained the order of the meeting before moving onto the presentation from the allotment working group.

2.0 PRESENTATION FROM THE ALLOTMENT WORKING GROUP AND THEIR FINDINGS

Councillor K. Bedwell presented details of the background to the work of the working group and the findings of their detailed review undertaken over the summer months, which has resulted in a new proposal for fees and charges, which will come into effect on 1 April 2023. No changes will occur in the interim period. All tenants will be written to by letter to confirm these details. A copy of the powerpoint presentation is attached at appendix A.

3.0 QUESTIONS ALREADY SUBMITTED PRIOR TO THE CONFERENCE

Councillor S. Mayhew read through the questions that had already been submitted by allotment tenants prior to the meeting; providing a response to each one.

Q1. Can I have a categoric undertaking that Uckfield Town Council will not under any circumstances sell/lease/let/licence or by any other means allow the use of any allotment lands in the area of Framfield Road for use as additional car parking for nearby residents as a result of housebuilding (Bird in Eye)?

A. *This was a very good question with the recent application being put forward by developers for Bird in Eye Farm. Uckfield Town Council had not received any request to do so, and there was no current requirement to sell/lease/let/licence additional land in Framfield Road for car parking provision.*

Q2. A tenant on the Framfield East site had asked for the Town Council to ban the use of all Pesticides and Herbicides on ALL allotment sites.

A. *Unfortunately, this is a difficult matter as it is very difficult to manage and enforce*

without being on the sites daily. However with a detailed review due to be undertaken of the allotment tenancy agreement, this will be a chance to recommend this to tenants for the future.

Q3. It has been suggested that unworked large sites could be split into smaller plots before being re-let.

A. *Although we understand the suggestion with increasing demand, this demand was seen during the pandemic, and in a couple of years the level of demand may reduce again. Currently tenants would not be offered this option and is in the current staffing shortages, this would be resource intensive and new pathways would have to be put in with associated costs. If a tenant is however struggling with the size of their plot, tenants were recommended to contact Rachel at the Town Council so we can consider your circumstances and how we can best support you. The Town Council recognises that all circumstances vary.*

Q4. A tenant on the Framfield East site asked, would the council consider the long-term programme of maintenance/repair and replacement of existing boundaries to allotments. Several locations had suffered over the last two seasons with intrusion from wild deer, and extensive destruction of grown veg/flowers and fruit trees.

A. *Unfortunately finances were currently very tight, timber/and fencing materials were very hard to obtain and had increased by 60% in cost. A quote was received for the placement of a fence just for Framfield Road and this came in at between £10 and 14k and this would only cover some of the boundary line. An alternative of hedge planting had been suggested by the allotment working group with a commitment to improve the situation at locations needing it most. These would be made up of British species.*

The tenant also asked that the allotment entrance/exit gates should be maintained and in good working order. Tenants should also ensure to keep gates to deter unwanted intrusion.

Q5. Water costs – a tenant on West Park had asked for a breakdown of the water costs over the past year i.e. to understand whether the increase to the water bill last year was due to increased usage or the increase of water per cubic metre.

A. *Once the water bills had been received for 2021 and the Town Council had checked these against the meter readings, it should be possible to update tenants with the overall fees and charges and send the invoices out as per normal. Linked to that, the Town Council had seen substantial increases in utility charges across the board over the past couple of years. Some may have seen the Uckfield News story which reported the vast increases the Town Council was due to see in electricity and gas charges, with increases of 88% in gas, and 59% in electricity. With no control over these charges, all allotment holders were encouraged to reduce the use of the taps, ensure they were turned off after use, and utilise water butts and storage containers to reduce usage of the mains.*

Q6. Dog fouling – a tenant on the Framfield East site mentioned a couple of ‘outside’ dog walkers coming onto the allotment site, one of them let their dog off the lead and said that because it was council land everyone owned it! The tenant asked if there was something that could be done to prevent outsiders and letting their dogs off leads. She also mentioned that because of the latest developments on Ridgewood, the land was no longer there for some dog walkers so they could be using the allotments instead!

A. *The Town Council had noted that there were currently issues with dog walkers at the Ridgewood allotments and Bird in Eye site coming from Keld Avenue. Wealden DC did have public space protection orders in place for dog fouling – signs could be seen on all of the town’s open spaces which if caught would incur a fixed penalty notice. However this seemed to have little impact to date. The Town Council would place up signage at all entrances to the allotment sites, reminding members of the public of right of access, and for all allotment tenants to keep their dogs on a lead, if not fines could be incurred.*

Q7. It was reported that someone had driven onto the Bird in Eye allotment site over the weekend just gone, and it had torn the ground to pieces. Some tenants wondered if chippings could be spread over it.

A. *Unfortunately chippings could end up encouraging further driving onto the allotment and tenants should refrain from doing this especially during the autumn/winter months when the ground is soft/wet.*

Q8. Some tenants had asked about deterring deer on Allotments (mainly in summer time).

A. *It was reported that deer resistant plants were quite helpful – usually those with scented foliage. Mediterranean plants such as Lavender, Rosemary, Cistus, Bay, Nepeta (catmint), Sages, Euphorbia etc. Shrub-wise they tended not to go for Choisya ternata (which had very pungent leaves), Rhododendron, Box, Hydrangea, deciduous Viburnum and Weigela to name a few. And thorny plants were often good deterrents including evergreen Berberis, Chaenomeles, Mahonia, wild roses (Rosa rugosa and Rosa spinosissima), plus also globe thistles (Echinops).*

4.0 Q&A FROM THE FLOOR

Attendees were welcomed to ask questions from the floor. Councillor B. Cox facilitated the question and answer session with the Town Clerk providing a roving microphone to assist with sound levels.

Q. It was asked if bees were allowed on allotments.

Cllr. B. Cox explained that the Town Council had supported a bee project and an application for funding was previously provided in the form of a grant. If further requests were received, consideration would have to be given if other sites were suitable and if this was a request by allotment holders. The Town Council were keen to entice and encourage bees as they were good for the town's biodiversity, although there were also issues surrounding this of course.

Q. A resident on the Framfield West allotment site asked if fencing could be considered as a means of protection against wildlife invasion such as deer getting on to the allotments. It had been successful in a relative's allotment in Redhill.

Cllr. B. Cox explained that it was expensive to provide fencing and difficult to get hold of too with current issues with materials. Cllr B. Cox said that going back to this topic, he understood this issue quite well as he lived in Australia for four years where the possum would come in to the garden and destroy everything. However, he also highlighted that as the council were trying to keep costs down this was something that would increase costs so this would have to be discussed further. He said that the Town Council were only getting approximately thirty-eight percent back from allotment income of the costs incurred to the council, so if a fence were added as well further consultation would be required with allotment holders.

The Town Clerk agreed and said that for fairness there would have to be a consultation, particularly on those allotment sites, but also to remember that the Town Council's budget setting process was currently underway. The draft budget went to Full Council in December and would only be approved and adopted once finalised in January. Therefore, she highlighted that it would be very unlikely that this would be considered in the next financial year owing to the fact that if we were looking in the region of £20k for part or all of one site.

Cllr. J. Edwards advised that a relative had an allotment in a rural and in the past three years the relative had struggled with the first time in 70 years; absolutely wiped out by deer which was pretty demoralising. Last year the relative had placed flexy

mesh that came in an 8ft wide roll and they just had some wooden posts and lashed it to rope. He said that it wasn't particularly hard fencing and was about 5ft tall so obviously deer could jump over if they wanted to, but if the deer nudged it and felt a bit of resistance then they would be more likely to move elsewhere. It was noted that tenants should try to avoid a deer getting trapped if they were to jump over any fencing, as this could cause more damage. Although there were still a lot of deer droppings in the area, this solution had been pretty successful for a couple of seasons.

Cllr. J. Edwards also mentioned the increase in deer numbers where they had not been controlled properly over the last few years.

Q. A resident asked if there was any way to offset electricity costs knowing we had some solar panels?

The Town Clerk advised that Uckfield Town Council had undertaken a carbon audit earlier this year which highlighted that the biggest offender was actually gas. The Estates and Facilities Manager was looking into ways we could change our heating systems, with Foresters Hall already changed to a heat pump system and the Signal Box next.

The pellet hopper for the Civic Centre's biomass boiler had also been expanded this year to reduce the number of deliveries over the autumn/winter season. The Town Council was also looking at solar panels for other buildings to try to increase the offset.

Q. A tenant asked about the Town Council subsidising allotment costs and asked if costs would be going up with other facilities such as sports facilities.

The Town Clerk pointed out that it currently costed us £21k with only £4.5k income and the proposed change in income would still incur a £13k gap for the Town Council.

As Chair of the Finance-Sub Committee, Cllr B Cox advised that many of the Town Council's fees and charges were going to be reviewed, with more areas up for review in 2022 including cemetery costs, room hire and sports pitches. The pandemic had had a large impact on income streams.

Cllr K. Bedwell added that it was not just the allotment prices that were going up and that this was just the first audit completed in recent years. She referred to the recent decision to seek to lease out West Park Pavilion on a full repairing lease.

Q. A resident enquired about the cost of hedging and pruning as an alternative option to fencing.

The Town Clerk advised that the Estates and Facilities Manager had begun researching these costs and this could be reported back to tenants once the full details were available.

Q. A resident said that the numbers on the waiting list seemed disproportionate to the number of overall allotment plots and that since he joined four years ago there were only thirty people on the waiting list compared to over a hundred this year. He asked if the Town Council had any alternative land available for more allotments.

Cllr B. Cox wanted to clarify the situation with proposed development sites subject to a previous comment that perhaps these sites could have been used for allotment land. He advised that the Town Council had raised their concerns at multiple meetings about these developments and lack of provision for means of leisure and recreation other than play areas and SANGs. Also, those areas of land that were not

owned by the Town Council were often private land and not accessible to the Town Council for allotment land.

The Town Clerk pointed out that over the last six years since she joined the office the waiting list had normally waived on average twenty to thirty people per annum. The waiting list increased in April 2020, so these current circumstances of the pandemic should be taken in to account. However, she also said that the Town Council had been talking to developers and the allotment working group had begun looking at various options for additional allotment space.

It should also be noted that if existing allotment site were to be extended, there were a number of legalities that had been processed. For example, if the allotment site at Ridgewood were expanded onto the recreation ground. This land was currently registered as common land/village green, and if the Town Council were to look to change a section of this land, there would be quite a lengthy legal route to get the land redesignated. And in fact, some of that land was originally allotment land, so it demonstrates over the course of time, how things change in terms of demand.

Cllr B. Cox added that the Town Council did wish to increase allotment land and wanted to dispel any rumours that we wanted to get rid of allotments.

Q. A tenant enquired that when tenants did not make use of their allotments, had the Town Council asked anyone to leave their allotments to make proper use of those spaces.

Cllr K. Bedwell advised that this had been a problem historically and said that both Rachel and herself had recently met on the Framfield Road sites along with an Allotment Association member to look at plots not being cultivated. She said that the Town Clerk had changed the structure of the office team, to provide more resource for both allotments and the cemetery. Rachel had started to contact individuals and they would be given a very short time to either utilise their plots or to relinquish them.

The next items for discussion for the allotment working group would be to review the rules and regulations and tenancy agreement, as these had not been updated for some time. One issue raised related to larger allotments but where they were not cultivated. They had also noticed that some people had allotments in quite difficult places to access whereas other allotments were sitting on prime sites and appeared to be unused, so those were issues that were being addressed.

Cllr K. Bedwell announced that both herself and Rachel would be meeting with the Allotment Association twice a year and they would also be looking to appoint a site representative on each site to encourage feedback from tenants through those means. Tenants could also contact Rachel and make her aware so that the Town Council could arrange an inspection. She said that it was clear that communication between the allotment holders and Uckfield Town Council had not been good historically so we needed to draw a line here going forward and address any issues and concerns hands on. Cllr K. Bedwell reminded attendees that the next piece of work for the allotment working group would be to focus on the tenancy agreement.

Q. If the cost of the council on my allotment was £55 would that compare to other places?

Cllr K. Bedwell explained that the working group had compared the allotment prices across East and West Sussex and found that there were quite a range of different structures and that Uckfield came out middle to low.

Q. A member of the Allotment Association, David Newton, highlighted that the Allotment Association had started with three bee hives on the Framfield Road sites and had applied for a grant last year from the Town Council for bee hives and fencing and some bee suits for the club and were successful, achieving nearly £800. In the light of this, and that the Chairman had said they had £44k to distribute amongst charities (which unfortunately due to the pandemic this year had reduced to £27k) he asked if it were possible for the allotment holders to apply for a grant to install deer fencing.

Cllr B. Cox stressed that although there had been a community grant application, community grants would not have been able to cover the full cost of a £14k fence.

The Town Clerk also clarified that the lump sum for the community groups to apply for for community grant funding had been £27,500 for the past two to three years, and previously £25,000. The full amount given out each year was actually nearer £55k but this included two service level agreements with Wealden Citizens Advice and the Uckfield Volunteer Centre,

Q. A resident asked what was happening with the site that Ridgewood Care Home was on which had been raised to the ground and derelict for quite a long time.

Cllr B. Cox said that although he agreed that many places in Uckfield that would make great allotment sites, unfortunately this was not council owned land.

However, the Town Clerk said that she would check this as a few years ago an application had been put forward for this site for another care home.

Q. One resident announced that he felt you couldn't put a price on having an allotment since so many people had benefited from this during lockdown and he felt that it was very good value for money. He also asked if photographic evidence of plots not being utilised would be of use to staff?

Cllr B. Cox thanked the tenant for their offer of assistance and agreed that going forward such information could be shared with the appointed site reps for each site and/or allotment association. In the meantime photographs and information was also deemed helpful. Cllr B. Cox also mentioned that the working party had suggested looking at ways of helping some tenants create more space by maybe sharing land with a neighbour in order to reduce the waiting list and that any feedback would be useful to know.

Q. Another resident had spoken to Rachel's predecessor and knew that there had been a lot of aggravation on allotments historically, but that this review of the fees and charges was value for money. He announced that he had retired from Southern Water in 2013 in Brighton and he remembered that one single allotment was even at that time £70 back then, although he thought that was extravagant but we needed to compare those costs and that we had a good deal.

Cllr B. Cox added that the working group had found during their investigations quite a variance in the way in which organisations charged for allotment plots, and the difference in charging rates as each town or parish council also had their own hidden costs.

Q. A tenant on the West Park allotments pointed out that there had been many complaints about non-allotment holders parking in the allotment car park, including local people and footballers. She asked if the town council could invest in fining those drivers.

Cllr B. Cox said that although parking was an issue in a number of areas in the town, he said that unfortunately, the Town Council did not have any power or parking wardens to enforce this behaviour. It would incur additional costs. He suggested either speaking to those people concerned or placing notes on cars which he felt could deter them from returning.

It was then suggested whether people could park further onto the grass instead. The Town Clerk added that the Town Council had been struggling with a number of sites since the pandemic - Foresters Hall being one where the car park was often full with local residents' parking which restricted hirers from parking. It would be possible for the Town Council to explore various options such as notices, the size of the parking area or even small things that might change behaviour temporarily, if not longer term.

Q. A resident on the Ridgewood site said that he didn't have any questions as such but just wanted to mention a few points. One of them being that the number of applications had clearly impacted the allotment waiting list during the pandemic and that it was possible that over the next year or so those numbers would decrease, although he also said that it was a shame that only a few allotment tenants had turned up tonight out of a large number of plot holders. Going back to costs, he said that he understood that the subsidy came out of the precept pot and that if tenants had not been paying the full amount, the rest would have to have come from local rate payers.

On the question of dog fouling, he mentioned about the ambiguity of signs and said that although some dog walkers accessed the allotments on leads that would not really be a problem, but asked if the council could consider dog control much more seriously due to children on sites and people generally.

A last point he also raised was to ask about encouraging schools to educate children about allotments.

Cllr B. Cox remarked that he had noticed a Facebook page on allotments along the Framfield Road that had become quite popular and also, Holy Cross School had allotments there and discussed plants and growth, as well as Little Horsted.

Cllr B. Cox said that the issue with dog fouling was an issue that would be discussed further by the working group and to look at the education side and fines, although this could not be enforced. He also agreed that it would be coming out of all tax payer's pockets and that the allotment working group had to ensure that other residents' interests were taken into consideration.

Cllr K. Bedwell agreed that the waiting list did fluctuate and that it would be a problem to suddenly find more plots to set up with pathways etc only to find that suddenly the demand dropped. She confirmed that over the pandemic there had been a huge increase in applications and the waiting list shot up, this being due to many factors but that would drop down again and then we would be left with a lot of plots not being utilised, so it was a fine balance. She said that we also needed to understand that we certainly couldn't produce allotments from nowhere

or put them on private land and that a lot of the plots of land at the moment were being highlighted for areas of build by developers.

She finished by saying that a lot of green spaces such as farm land and private land was being put forward by landowners as having potential for development. These sites had recently been published by Wealden DC through their SHELAA (Strategic Housing & Economic Land Availability Assessment), as potential for development. The Town Council simply did not have the money to buy up land such as this with high market value.

Q. A resident asked how this would affect allotments with the planning requirements of Section 106 for developers to provide facilities or land available for local communities.

Cllr K. Bedwell explained how S106 agreements worked. The Town Clerk added that developers often viability and provide the minimum, for a play area and possible SANGs and there was little need for more play areas in Uckfield. Historically, Section 106 agreements related to highway improvements, footway links and play area provision and sometimes this could also have a stipulation that such improvements could only be made in a specific radius of the development. Discussions also highlighted that Community Infrastructure Levy had now meant that S106 agreements could end up being abolished altogether.

Cllr B. Cox said that he appreciated this input and that this level of discussion may come up again but he was minded that questions should focus on the allotment sites, at the allotment conference.

Q. How many tenants had two or more allotments and did the council think that was fair?

Cllr K. Bedwell advised that the allotment working group had discussed this issue and agreed it would be unfair to those who had been maintaining and cultivating their allotments for a long time to take that space away from them, just because there was greater demand.

Cllr B. Cox concluded the Q&A session – it had been stimulating to listen to the allotment community. He also said that if any tenants did wish to discuss any of those issues raised any further or had any further questions to ask, to contact the Town Council office. Cllr B. Cox also reminded tenants of the Community Fridge next to Luxford Field. Tenants were always welcome to take any surplus food there on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from 10am until midday.

5.0 LOOKING AHEAD TO 2022 – ALLOTMENT COMPETITION & CONFERENCE

The Town Clerk thanked everyone for attending and advised that the Town Council hoped to run the Allotment Competition again in 2022. She commended the support of Staverton's Nursery who had been a great help over the years and provided excellent prizes. If anyone had any feedback on the competition, to let the Town Council office before they started planning for next year. It was also hoped that the conference could return to its usual time in the year, in 2022, in September.

The meeting closed at 8.20pm.

Appendices : Appendix A (copy of the powerpoint presentation)