



MINUTES OF THE ALLOTMENT CONFERENCE

Wednesday 20 September 2023 at 7.00pm in the Weald Hall, Civic Centre.

In attendance: Councillor. K. Bedwell
Councillor. S. Mayhew
Councillor. A. Smith

31 members of the public
Councillor. D. French
Councillor. P. Selby
Rachel Newton, Senior Administrative Officer
(Minutes taken by Rachel Newton)

1.0 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Prior to the commencement of the conference, Cllr S. Mayhew advised allotment holders that we had been informed recently by Cllr D. French, the Deputy Mayor, that a former allotment tenant, Ivor Wickens, had sadly passed away. A moment was held by fellow allotment holders in his memory and a message given to all who knew him that they would be welcome to attend the service, which was due to take place at the Wealden Crematorium, Horam on Monday 25 September 2023 at 2.00pm.

Cllr. Mayhew introduced himself (Chair of Environment and Leisure committee and councillor for New Town) as well as other members of the Allotment Working Group and staff at the top table, including Cllr. K. Bedwell (Uckfield Ridgewood), Cllr. A. Smith (Uckfield North) and the Senior Administrative Officer before moving onto the presentation of the allotment winners.

2.0 ALLOTMENT COMPETITION WINNERS 2023

Stavertons Nursery had judged the allotment plots that were entered this year and also read through the accompanying statements from the Children's entrees which provided a great insight into their workmanship.

The judging criteria for Best Kept allotment included condition of plot, good workmanship, quality of crops, flowers, fruits and veg and plants, water conservation, encouragement of wildlife, use of recycled materials and condition of paths, garden buildings.

The judging criteria for Ecological Award included reuse, reduce and recycle, efforts to conserve water, encouraging insects and wildlife to the plot and ecological statement.

For the Childrens Award, this category was open to children under 16 years of age and for children to decide what they wanted to grow.

The winners were read out under each of the following categories:

Best Kept Winners:

Bird in Eye – Katie Hobday
Framfield Road West – Chris Scraba
Bell Lane – Phil Castell
Ridgewood – Annette Butler & Mr Peter Gillett

Ecological Award:

Ridgewood – Christina Gardner

Children's Award:

Framfield Road East – Isabelle Tobys (who is growing a purple teepee bean year by year from her own seeds)

Each winner above received a Winners' Certificate and gift voucher worth £25.

The Overall Winner:

Framfield Road West – Chris Scraba

The 'Allotment Shield' was presented to this years' winner (with engraving of his name included) along with the Winners' Certificate.

Winner of the Scarecrow Competition:

West Park - Mr Gerald Bailey

The winner of the Scarecrow Competition received a basket of goodies from Uckfield Town Council.

**3.0 INSPIRATIONAL WORDS FROM GEOFF KNIGHT (ALLOTMENT TENANT)
ON THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF HAVING AN ALLOTMENT**

Allotment holder, Geoff Knight, provided an inspirational short talk last year about the rewards and health benefits of time spent on an allotment and he wished to share a few words to help inspire people:

"One of the joys of having an allotment is the social benefit, that comes with 'being' part of a community, who share the same values, and often vegetables, when they don't go to the Community Fridge ... I must include a plug for this wonderful service on offer, with my thanks to all involved.

We also enjoy learning from each other's successes and failures, which is a good life lesson, along with everyone helping out with watering when holidays come. Also, when it comes to the cost of living crisis, it should be more about caring and sharing for those in need."

4.0 UPDATE FROM THE TOWN COUNCIL'S ALLOTMENT WORKING GROUP

Councillor K. Bedwell presented the attached slides [see item 6.1(App A) – Allotment Conference Powerpoint slides].

It was recognised, especially during the pandemic, how important a little bit of green space was and that it was important for the allotments to be working well and appropriately.

After much consultation and feedback, the new pricing structure commenced on 1 April 2023. Two tenants were unsure as to why tenants with two plots adjacent to one another still had to pay two admin charges.

Cllr K. Bedwell explained that the admin fee was separate to the fees and charges for the rent and water and was introduced as a percentage towards the costs of running the allotments, for staffing and resources to ensure the allotments were being managed properly. The admin charge was calculated by dividing those costs against the number of plots rented out.

Cllr. K. Bedwell also explained the process for any future changes being made to the structure of the allotment fees and charges, which would require a further twelve-months' notice period and agreement sought by the Environment and Leisure committee and councillors at a Full Council meeting.

The allotment fees and charges would be reviewed again by the working group in 2024.

The next allotment working group meeting was going to be held on 6 November 2023 at the Civic Centre, to bring together the councillors, allotment reps and members of the Allotment Association. This would also provide a platform for any updates and questions coming in from the allotment sites.

5.0 ALLOTMENT CHECKS

The allotment checks were being carried out at the end of May, July and September. During those inspections, Uckfield Town Council would be sending out letters to allotment tenants in the following order if there were concerns that allotments were not being attended to:

1. Initial warning letter for lack of maintenance (4 weeks' notice to improve) which clearly identifies what rule has been breached and action plan required.
2. Final Warning letter (2 weeks' notice) which is the General Rule Breach Procedure provided by the National Allotment Society (NAS).
3. Notice to quit (Allotment Tenancy Agreement is terminated) with reasons provided. If there is any rubbish left on the plot, there may be a charge for its disposal.

If there was a genuine reason as to why an allotment was not being looked after, allotment tenants were advised to contact Rachel at the Civic Centre so that she was aware of this.

Cllr. A. Smith announced three new plots created on the Bird in Eye, Ridgewood and West Park sites. Also, as Uckfield Town Council was a consultee in terms of planning and development, councillors were also talking to developers about carving out new allotment land and were trying hard to advocate for more green spaces.

6.0 QUESTIONS ALREADY SUBMITTED PRIOR TO THE CONFERENCE

Q. Is there specific criteria and a set schedule that is followed, for mowing the grass on the major pathways on the allotments? The verges along the fences seem to get overlooked, more often than not and the main areas get very long at times.

A. Cllr Mayhew said that they would ask the Head Groundsman to identify if the grass areas mentioned around Framfield West 'top gate' to the allotments needed attention. Staffing levels were impacted in 2022-23. Although now fully staffed the Town Council had just recruited a new Countryside Ranger who looked after the nature reserves and ancient woodlands so it was a time for supporting staff with training and development and building their knowledge and experience.

Reps and tenants were asked to let Rachel know if there were any ongoing issues.

One tenant wished to say a word in favour of the Ground staff member who strimmed the grass back properly to the ranch fencing on the Framfield allotments. This was seconded by the rep on Framfield East site rep. Cllr K. Bedwell said thank you to them and that the working group would pass this message on to the Head Groundsman, as it wasn't an easy job.

Q. We are very concerned about the waiting list for allotments. We don't think there are enough allotments to supply all the new houses being built in the town. Builders should supply allotment land on their estates, the town should not be expected to supply them. One solution would be to have a cut off number like Doctors' surgeries and the list could be opened for applications when numbers drop. The town council could purchase more land but the money could come from developers. We do feel that some vulnerable allotment holders are being put under a lot of pressure to end their tenancies. As we all know, gardening is good for our mental health and wellbeing. Thank you.

A. Cllr Bedwell announced that nobody was under pressure to give up their allotments and that a lot of support was being offered to those who wanted to use their allotments but had health issues. An action plan had been created for some tenants although the council also needed to address those allotments not being cultivated. Uckfield Town Council were also looking to developers to provide more allotments, cemetery and recreational space for the town through planning requests, although ultimately councillors were also only too aware of push back on their requests.

Q. Why did the Council believe it fair to charge some people more than others when the land available to them is broadly the same and previously they had paid a similar amount?

A. This question had already been answered, although Cllr Bedwell wished to add that realistically, the council could not start again and make all the plots the same size, so plots were all different sizes. The admin fee was a charge per tenancy for each plot and was separate to the rent and water charge.

7.0 Q&A FROM THE FLOOR

Attendees were welcomed to ask questions from the floor. Councillor Bedwell facilitated the Q&A session with the Senior Administrative Officer providing a roving microphone to assist with sound levels.

Q. Notwithstanding some of the challenges you've got with capacity, have you done any projections on how long it will take to get a plot if you are number 52 in the queue.

A. The Senior Administrative Officer explained that it depended on individual preferences, which could include requests for a specific location, plot size or plot number. If a plot was refused it would then be offered to the next person on the waiting list. Just to note that additional plots could now be offered to those tenants with a plot already, although priority would be given to those without a plot first.

Since better checks and assistance was in place from councillors on the working group and the allotment reps, the waiting list had reduced considerably and there was also an increase in the number of newcomers, who were enjoying their allotments and some were making remarkable progress and good use of the green space.

Q. In terms of capacity, are you able to divide plots further to accommodate others?

A. Yes, if larger plots are not being used effectively, they can be divided to ease up the space for current tenants and create more plots for others on the waiting list. Also, tenants may be offered to swap for an easier plot or site, if they prefer.

Q. Is the grass cutting on pathways around allotments up to the allotment holders now? The council used to cut around the edges and hedges.

A. Yes, the allotment holders are required to keep the grass cut themselves in between plots. This has always been stated in the allotment rules and regulations. The Ground staff used to help out, but some tenants had complained about the grass cuttings and others if the grass edges weren't being cut, so they will cut the main pathways but not between allotments.

Q. From previous questions, on the waiting list, are those wanting a second plot given priority over someone who wants a first plot?

A. No, priority will be given to those people on the waiting list who didn't have a plot first.

Q. Is it on the council's radar that there are people who have paid their rent for a plot have moved out of the area.

A. Yes, there were some tenants who had moved outside the parish. However, although plot offers were only made to those who lived within the parish, if someone moved and wished to keep their plot, as long as they were cultivating the plot and maintaining it well, the same criteria would apply during the allotment inspections.

8.0 LOOKING AHEAD TO 2024 – ALLOTMENT COMPETITION & CONFERENCE

Cllr Bedwell thanked everyone for their time and for joining us this evening.

Looking into 2024, the Town Council was keen to create better communications between the Allotment working group, reps and Allotment Association.

Tenants were encouraged to get to know their site reps and to join the Allotment Association as the hut list prices were excellent.

If anyone had any feedback on the allotment competition, they were also asked to get in touch with the Town Council office before they started planning for next year.

The meeting closed at 8:05pm

Appendices: Appendix A (copy of the PowerPoint presentation)