



MINUTES OF THE ALLOTMENT CONFERENCE

Wednesday 11 September 2024 at 7.00pm in the Weald Hall, Civic Centre.

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

21 members of the public
Rachel Newton, Senior Administrative Officer
(Minutes taken by Rachel Newton)

1.0 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

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

Cllr. Smith recommended visiting the Chelsea Physic Garden for anyone who wished to learn more about the power of plants and their medicinal value and to connect with things that grow from the soil. Cllr Smith also expressed that this had given her a greater insight and respect for the work allotment holders put in to their plots.

The Allotment Association had informed us that the bees were doing well this year and that they had a dozen members in the Bee Club now which was fantastic news for the allotments. Uckfield Town Council planned to meet up with members of the Allotment Association soon to discuss the role of reps, the allotment inspections and current membership levels.

Cllr Mayhew thanked the allotment reps for their invaluable support and contribution with the checks so far this year, and for raising any allotment enquiries on behalf of tenants. He also expressed how beneficial it would be to invite more volunteer reps to help keep track of any plots that were not being cultivated, as they had the knowledge and expertise and could potentially work together to flag up any issues or concerns.

2.0 ALLOTMENT COMPETITION WINNERS 2024

We were fortunate to have Stavertons Nursery sponsor the Allotment Competition once again this year. The sunshine held out for the judges on the day to decide the winners in each category.

Earlier in the year, the Marketing and Community Engagement Officer had sent out a request for tenants to share any ideas before the announcement of the chosen categories.

This year, tenants were keen to promote peoples' efforts and to encourage wildlife on to their plots, including birds and insects. For example, nectar rich

flowers and plants that were bee and pollinator friendly and maybe a small pond or water area for birds and amphibians, not using pesticides and perhaps sheltered habitats such as a small log pile or bug hotel.

We were also asked to make the competition automatic entry this year as it was felt that some of the best plots were not being recognised and that the competition should be a celebration and not a basis for bad feeling. Also, some tenants were trying their best, even if time was an issue and this was taken into account.

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 and 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 Children's Award, the category was open to children under 16 years of age and for children to decide what they wanted to grow.

The winners were announced (with photos) under each of the following categories:

Best Kept Winners:

Bird in Eye – Mrs S. Read
Framfield Road West – Andrew & Mary Ford
Framfield Road East – Phil Manning
Ridgewood – Ian Scutt & Sandy James
West park – Janet Snow
Bell Lane – Mr Coleman

Ecological Award:

Framfield Road East – Heather Berry

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

Children's Award (2 x joint winners):

Ridgewood – Casey Harrison-Graves (who helped create a raised bed and planted potatoes, carrots and parsnips. This was a labour of love and hope)

Framfield Road West – May Kala Vilar (the slugs unfortunately ate the green and oriental salad leaves, so Maya entered the squash and peas instead)

Each winner received a Winner's Certificate and gift voucher worth £10.

The Overall Winner:

Framfield Road East – Phil Manning

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:

Ridgewood – "Bob the builder" created by Joelle Jeffery and family.

The winner of the Scarecrow Competition received a gift voucher from Uckfield Town Council worth £10.

Cllr Donna French created “Rex and Ursula” who both took up residence at the Civic Centre during the week of the competition to admire and take selfies with! Some of the materials were on loan from the ‘Hospice in the Weald’ charity shop on the High Street.

3.0 SHORT TALKS PRESENTED BY:

1. Allotment holder, Joelle Jeffery, kindly prepared a short talk on the benefits of starting an allotment plot with all the family:

“As a family venture, we started our allotment in June 2023. We entered the Scarecrow Competition for fun and our 9-year old son enjoyed stuffing the scarecrow with straw and putting his yellow Bob the Builder hat on! We also have an 18-month old baby, and they both help with the watering and harvesting when crops are ready. The children are also learning where their food comes from and how to care for the plants so it’s a great way for us to share this experience and to do something that’s positive for the next generation.”

2. Andi Jaffray, Director of the ‘We Grow’ initiative founded in Forest Row and based on the benefits of having local groups meet to swap to share seeds, seedlings, tools and knowledge. Their current areas of focus included Lewes, Uckfield, Crowborough, Forest Row and surrounding villages.

4.0 UPDATES 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].

ALLOTMENT COSTS

Cllr Bedwell provided an update on the average total expenditure of running the allotments and total income which equalled out and demonstrated that we were now on target, although the Town Council were still subsidising the allotments alongside the increasing cost of materials and taking account of the discounts applied. The water charge was always kept separate as this was taken from the final water bills and divided between each site.

Cllr Bedwell explained that the admin fee was still being introduced as a percentage towards the costs of running the allotments and was calculated by dividing those costs against the number of tenancies.

Members would still need to review the allotment fees and charges for 2025/26.

ALLOTMENT CHECKS

A lot of letters had been sent out this year for non-cultivation and weed control, although the weather had not helped and it was understood there were issues with slugs in the spring, bindweed and marestail. A number of plots were rescinded due to various reasons and some tenants carried on once the weather improved.

Some concerns were raised by a couple of tenants in relation to the way the checks had been carried out, especially where it seemed apparent that some plots had been planted out or seeded but the crops could not be seen growing yet. With hindsight, it was felt that the letter was perhaps too harshly worded and

that plots with weeds just needed a nudge, and not a letter for non-cultivation. For these reasons, the allotment working group reviewed the process for allotment checks and had subsequently made a few changes:

1. Joint allotment checks to be undertaken twice a year (instead of three) - May/June & September/October;
2. Either 'weeds prompt' letter for small areas, or a
3. Non-cultivation letter with 4 weeks' notice to improve & further check in September (if required), followed by a;
4. Final Warning letter (4 weeks' notice), and
5. Notice to quit (2 weeks' notice) with reasons provided. If there was any rubbish left on the plot, there may be a charge for its disposal.

Allotment tenants were advised to contact their rep or Rachel at the Civic Centre with any problems or any health issues so the council needed to be made aware of.

GROUNDS TEAM - UPDATES

Cllr Smith provided a breakdown of some examples of the maintenance tasks by the Grounds staff:

- Two cuts per month from spring onwards (weather depending) and hedges cut in October after bird season;
- The Framfield Road gate had been replaced with a pedestrian gate, not a kissing gate as this would encourage entry for larger vehicles but the pathway was too narrow;
- Some taps were on the maintenance list that needed attention although the threads were gone and needed re-plumbing so these were being ordered.
- There were problems with fence boundaries being looked into (discussed later in the meeting);
- There were only four grounds staff available and only two of them working on grass cutting at one time, the cemetery alone took longer than expected. They had a vast workload, especially during summer, so tenants were asked to bear with the council for the time being.

SUMMARY

Tenants were given a gentle reminder of their responsibility for cutting pathways between allotments and to keep them neat and tidy and free from weeds.

29 new tenants had been welcomed (so far) this year. There were three plots created by dividing larger plots, which had assisted with reducing the waiting list.

Councillors were keen to look at ways in which further support could be offered to assist one another if a tenant was struggling during a difficult time.

Councillors were also keen to talk to developers in the near future about carving out new allotment land and were trying hard to advocate for more green space for residents of Uckfield.

The next joint allotment working group meeting was being held on 11 November 2024 at the Civic Centre, to bring together the councillors, allotment reps and members of the Allotment Association to provide a platform for any updates and items raised by tenants.

5.0 QUESTIONS ALREADY SUBMITTED PRIOR TO THE CONFERENCE

Q. The hedge border between the hospital/development on the Framfield East Allotments needed cutting back on both sides and properly disposed of.

A. Rachel was in the process of establishing who was responsible for cutting back the hedge on the hospital side – apparently they were new contractors. The council would ask for them to place the cuttings on the car park side to the end of the fence border rather than throwing them over onto the allotment side. The allotment side would be put back on the list to be cut periodically.

6.0 Q&A FROM THE FLOOR

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

Q. Regarding the group of people that objected to the council increasing the rent, do you have a list of how many tenants have given up their plots because of this?

A. There were 24 new tenants who had relinquished their plots for various reasons. We had met or spoken with most of those people and although we could not tell specifically if this was the reason for some, most tenants had informed us that they did not have the time available.

Q. Another question is about plot sizes. There is a very pleasant couple who won before but their plot is now a tip and they said they would be giving up. Maybe you shouldn't offer people a big plot, give them a small plot first.

A. The problem was that we could only offer what was available at the time, so it would be entirely up someone if they wished to take the allotment. If it was too much for them, they could go to the top of the waiting list to wait for a swap or manage what they had until another plot became available.

Q. Providing an example of a good tenant, a family who took on a plot that needed a lot of attention on the Framfield East site have made huge improvements to the plot.

A. Cllr Bedwell explained that she had seen the plot in question and that it was good to see tenants enjoying their plots and that most of our tenants were excellent. Sometimes however it was not the tenant's fault if things got out of hand. The sad thing was that some tenants didn't always feel they could come to the Town Council but we just wanted everyone to enjoy their allotment, and to let us know if they weren't coping. This particular plot was one whereby the tenant thought she could cope initially, but didn't then realise the amount of work involved and little time she had to get there, but in the end this was all sorted out with no ill feeling. We just needed to ensure plots were offered to tenants who were aware from the beginning what was involved so we have met lots of new tenants this year and hope this helped. The Town Council was still here to represent tenants and their neighbours and to make sure plots did not become overgrown.

Q. The previous Town Council was faced with a long waiting list and had a policy for larger plots to become two which reduced the waiting list considerably at that time. I wondered what the reason was and why we had changed that policy. I was able to half my plot and gave the information to the Town Council.

A. At the time of the review, when the admin fee was added, and offered some tenants to swap for a larger plot if and when available to give them that opportunity instead of paying two admin fees. However, since then the council had been able to

split larger plots to accommodate new tenants. Also, as the waiting list had reduced this year following the checks, the council could also be a little more flexible and keep some bigger plots as some tenants had asked to upsize too. It was also about the time and cost to split plots, but it seemed to be working okay so far. We didn't have a rigid policy but this was the reasoning behind that and why we are now able to offer to split some plots.

Q. There is potential for one or two further plots at the Bird in Eye site just past the gate behind the pumping station. This may require a digger and lorry to remove the overgrown vegetation but this space would seem suitable and help reduce the waiting list even further.

A. This space was being used as a staff area but was being looked into already as a to create more plots. The Grounds team were currently using some of the site as a nursery for new saplings but they could be moved if necessary to other areas. This was being discussed with the Estates team.

Q. Can I ask to have a look at improving the drainage on the Bird in Eye where my allotment is, as discussed previously. Between November to March at least half of my plot is frequently under water, as is my neighbour's and needs some more drainage in the wider footpaths to drain the water away. I understand this is a budget issue but because I'm at the bottom of the hill it effects my plot more than anyone else's.

A. This would be looked into by the Grounds staff.

Q. Please can people shut the gates when leaving the Framfield West allotments.

A. Cllr Smith asked for this to be relayed in the minutes to ask all tenants to shut the gates behind them as they entered or left the allotment sites. This was something previously raised by the Estates team as a deterrent against anti-social behaviour and to deter dog walkers entering onto the allotments.

7.0 LOOKING AHEAD TO 2025 – ALLOTMENT COMPETITION & CONFERENCE

Cllr Smith thanked everyone for their time, and for attending and participating.

Looking towards 2025, the Town Council would welcome any ideas for the Allotment Competition, especially scarecrows(!) and the Council looked forward to seeing everyone at the Allotment Conference.

The meeting closed at 8:20pm

Appendices: Appendix A (copy of the PowerPoint presentation)