

Minutes of a Meeting to Discuss the Draft Allotment Strategy 2017-2027

Date: 7th March 2018, 2:00pm

Venue: LBRuT Civic Centre, 44 York Street, Twickenham TW1 3BZ

Present:

London Borough of Richmond upon Thames (the Council)

Yvonne Kelleher (YK)

Pete Lewis (PL)

Steve Marshall (StM)

Borough of Richmond Allotments Group (BRAG)

Howard Fletcher (HF)

Susan Moore (SuM)

Chris Morley-Smith (CMS)

Mike Wren (MW)

1. The meeting was called to discuss the draft Allotment Strategy 2017-2017 document prepared by StM on behalf of the Council. BRAG had held a meeting to gather initial responses from site representatives and further comments were subsequently received from various sites. These have been combined into a single document, attached here as an appendix, which was presented to the Council shortly prior to this meeting and was used to drive the discussion.
2. CMS thanked the council for the well-presented document which had generally been favourably received. However, some points required further exploration and some were points of contention needing resolution.
3. The 10-year period of the strategy was questioned by CMS. YK said that there were no major changes proposed within the document and it would be reviewed during its course. StM said that most recommendations would be implemented sooner rather than later. SuM said that at least an outline plan with milestones should be included.
4. The lack of any financial data in the document was noted. YK said that she would let CMS have current figures by the end of March. StM said that financial details were not necessary for the strategy, but HF said that some recommendations would require additional resources. YK said that there was no intention to change the current staffing, but further resources are available within the department for specific tasks. SuM suggested that a statement of finance and resource requirements would assist the department with management of the political issues.
5. YK said that the Council could support applications for funds from Civic Pride (under £5,000) and Village Planning Funds (over £5,000).

6. Site mapping, which was left uncompleted from the previous strategy, was discussed. Some sites have produced their own maps. PL said that plot numbering was of far greater importance. CMS said that some plot boundaries need clearer marking. Plot numbering is the responsibility of the plotholder (as stated in the T&C's), and its importance should be emphasised to new tenants. PL will remind site representatives.
7. The reference to "commercial food production" is lifted from text in the planning document. It is recognised that commercial growing is not permitted in allotments.
8. Advice for prospective and new tenants about the necessary work in managing a plot could reduce early plot turnover. YK invited BRAG to provide some guidelines which would be published on the Council website.
9. "Food growing space" could be requested by the Council in planning major new developments such as Mortlake Brewery and Whitton Free School. StM said that this has been successful in Ealing. However, it is not considered to be a high priority.
10. CMS pointed out that BRAG had previously conducted a survey at David Allister's request to confirm the level of representation claimed by BRAG. BRAG was disappointed that this had not been properly acknowledged.
11. The difficult issue of bonfires was raised again. CMS said that the current limitations are not practical and that a review after a period of operation had been promised by Cllr Fleming. YK said that this would be revisited as part of updating T&C's, but this could take too long. PL will discuss this further with CMS.
12. A survey of plotholders would be useful. It is recognised that one site could not be chosen as representative for a pilot, but StM said that it could be used to validate the intended questions. HF suggested simply repeating the previous survey held in 2013, with the advantage that trends could be determined by using consistent material.
13. Some improvements are being made to the administrative systems, but PL is still spending too great a proportion of his time in the office. Increasing time is being taken up with neighbour-neighbour disputes, involving not just PL but YK and others as well. HF said that it is evident that PL is too stretched and that delayed lettings lead to plots becoming more overgrown. PL said that 500 plots have been re-let over the past 3 years – 25% of the total.
14. Waiting lists were discussed. SuM said that a data clean-up exercise is needed and should not be difficult to do. YK said that some work has been done on this and the website will soon show the number of applications outstanding for each site and how long people can expect to wait. This should help manage the waiting list numbers and applicants' expectations. CMS said that he was

surprised that the Council had not compiled a database of all the sites' waiting lists that would identify those included on several different sites. PL said that he needs the waiting lists from Short Lots and Westfields to complete this work.

15. PL said that site Letting Officers could greatly help by taking on the task of verifying groups of waiting list entries. He would happily supply a number (say, 10) of entries representing a month or two of the oldest applications, and Lettings Officers could try emailing or telephoning to confirm continued access and interest. This could also be an opportunity to assess the applicant's intentions as to whether they still wanted to take up an offer of a plot and their practical capability of doing so. PL will contact Lettings Officers to explore this further.
16. T&C's need updating and this should be done by the end of the summer so that they can be confirmed in the October 2018 invoice run. YK asked BRAG to help with this by forming a subgroup to work on the revision. CMS will take this forward. The East Sheen Allotment group has drafted a Code of Conduct which should be included.
17. There was discussion on the errors/discrepancies on the rent invoices issued by Capita last October. As the usual previous letter indicating payment of the rent confirmed acceptance of the T&C's was not issued, CMS proposed that in future such a statement should be printed on the actual invoices.
18. YK agreed that the Council allotments website should be improved and made more user-friendly. BRAG could suggest and draft items for inclusion.
19. PL has been working on an improved termination process including new standard letters. These will ensure that the 4-week termination period is definitive, and will refer to upgraded T&C's to reduce the opportunity for confusion. YK said that the Council is aware the current system is not effective and asked for BRAG's help with the revisions.
20. StM explained that the note referring to plots being re-let before a complaints procedure is exhausted would apply when the complaints process itself is being questioned. This would not lead to a plot having to be returned to a complainant.
21. YK said that the Council will always respond to issues where health & safety is compromised. On neglected plots, perhaps site volunteers could help by covering areas. Sometimes external volunteers come forward and Continental Landscapes could be asked to remove waste. If appropriate instances arise, sites should approach YK directly.
22. StM said that the reference to self-management of sites was not intended to mean full devolvement. The Council wishes to work to consistent agreements with clear roles and responsibilities and accepts that input from site volunteers

is essential. YK said that she understood that the terminology used was unacceptable to BRAG.

23. The Council intends to survey trees on a 3-4 year cycle. CMS said that this is important as some plots/sites have issues with tree shading making plots partly unusable.
24. CMS closed by thanking YK and her team for meeting with BRAG representatives and confirmed we would keep in touch on matters requiring action.

/HF

Borough of Richmond Allotment Group (BRAG) – Response to Draft Allotment Strategy

1. The document refers frequently to the Allotment Terms & Conditions (T&Cs). These should form an appendix to the document and be subject to the same review.
2. The document now covers a 10-year period rather than the expected 5 years. This seems rather ambitious and such an extended period would not allow a review of circumstances modified by the actions now proposed. However, there is no timetable or plan for implementation of the recommendations.
3. The document contains no financial information or future projections. The previous strategy document provided estimated costs and rental income for the period covered. Similarly, there is no statement of the current or likely future resources to be provided by the Council.
4. The Council could, in the event that further funding is not to be made available, clarify what other options might be available for individual projects, such as Civic Pride or Village Planning funds.
5. The document reflects on the previous recommendations and comments on their achievement or otherwise. Some dates need to be completed in the document. Many of these that were achieved were due at least in part to input from site representatives and volunteers. The part which they must also play in the future recommendations needs to be recognised in the document.
6. The document notes that the previous recommendation that all sites are mapped was not completed. This should be carried forward to the new strategy.
7. BRAG welcomes the conclusion of the document that the Council is providing sufficient allotment space (albeit by 1969 standards) and has no desire to decrease (or increase) that available.
8. The document makes reference to spaces for “commercial food production”. The relevance of this is unclear.
9. The document refers to the high turnover of new plotholders, which is acknowledged by representatives. It is felt that this is an area in which representatives can provide practical advice on procedures for mentoring and probation. Some sites have produced introductory leaflets to help new tenants, but it is felt that more should be available on the Council website to help prospective tenants decide whether they could take on the task. Some sites discuss what is needed with prospective tenants and seek assurance that the level of effort needed is understood – some guidelines should be agreed.
10. Although anecdotal evidence confirms the document’s assertion regarding an increased interest in allotments from families and younger people, there are no

statistics to back this up. This should perhaps be an area for investigation by periodic surveys to determine trends. It is believed – again anecdotally – that young families will tend to move on after a short period as their priorities change.

11. Looking to the future, the document in Section 4 sets out Strategic Principles, Goals and Recommendations. However there appears to be no relationship between them – not all Principles are addressed by Recommendations, and some Recommendations do not relate to Goals.
12. Recommendation 1 – does ‘food growing space’ mean allotments? Would the Council really demand allotments as part of new developments? The relevance (and certainly the priority) of this is questionable. Where sites are classed as Metropolitan Open Land it is understood that local plans can be overridden by Central Government directives.
13. Recommendation 2 – the recognition of BRAG is welcomed. BRAG was formed to help the Council by acting as a focal point for consultation and also to act as a conduit with Borough on allotment matters, although it is recognised that individual sites often have individual issues. An exercise to verify BRAG’s representation of plotholders was carried out in a bonfire survey early in 2017 at David Allister’s request. (Note: Survey sent to Council 19.02.17, acknowledged without comment. David Allister advises on 23.03.17 that bonfire matters will be included in revised T&Cs under new Allotment Strategy document.) Previous correspondence between the Council (including Cllr Fleming) and BRAG confirmed that after we had had some experience/feedback on the new bonfire rules they would be subject to review (see also Appendix 2 Fires).
14. Recommendation 3 – a survey would be welcomed, but identifying a single representative site may prove problematic.
15. Recommendation 4 – it is agreed that administrative systems need improvement, but it is quite evident that the resources currently allocated by the Council to manage allotments is insufficient. Without the very considerable assistance provided by volunteer site representatives the current – scarcely satisfactory – situation would be unsustainable. There needs to be support in the case of absence of the Allotments Officer, and a plan for succession.
16. Recommendation 5 – closing waiting lists may exacerbate problems of plot turnover where potential plotholders are encouraged to select inappropriate sites. Waiting lists must be more proactively managed to reduce the number of irrelevant entries. An exercise should be carried out at the earliest opportunity to delete those no longer interested, and then an annual or ongoing refresh process to ensure people are contactable and still interested. This would reduce the number of vacant plots which deteriorate quickly when new tenancies are delayed. It should also be noted that dividing plots into smaller sizes increases the number of plotholders and therefore the administrative burden.

17. Recommendation 6 - The roles and responsibilities of plotholders, site committees, the Allotments Officer and the Council must be clear. Certainly all formal correspondence should be with the Council where related to tenancy.
18. Recommendation 7 – refinement of T&Cs should be ‘continual’ rather than ‘constant’. It is agreed that greater flexibility is needed. T&Cs should be included as appendix to the document. This would be an appropriate time to undertake a further an update/revision to the T&C’s. As with the previous main revision in 2013/14 we assume that BRAG would be consulted/included in the process.
19. Recommendation 8 – the letter which used to be sent with invoices did state that payment implied acceptance of the T&Cs. No letter was sent this year. There has also been some discussion regarding a Code of Conduct which is not mentioned in the document.
20. Recommendation 9 – the website should be made clearer and should also provide advice on the work needed to maintain a plot.
21. Recommendation 10 – the termination process and that for disputes needs improving to reduce the number of neglected plots. Emphasis should be placed on obtaining productive use from every plot, so inspections should take place at least in spring and evictions, where necessary, completed within 3 months. The proposal that plots should be re-let before a complaints process is exhausted could not work in practice.
22. Recommendation 11 – certainly assistance with clearing neglected plots would be most welcome and would reduce the difficulty and time to re-let. This would also reduce potential health & safety issues.
23. Recommendation 12 (Goal 5) – the proposal for self-management is not accepted by BRAG. Currently a number of sites have semi-devolved agreements and your rationale stating that the Council no longer recognises such agreements is not acceptable. Such agreements are still in place and have not been revoked by the Council. There has been considerable success in having these agreements, thus significantly reducing the workload of the Council and we find it difficult to see why you do not want to continue this approach. There is no appetite within BRAG members apart from one site Briar Road, for full devolution, not least because of the lack of financial information from the Council. Some alignment of the current semi-devolved agreements would be beneficial in helping the Council to manage allotments. It is clear that without considerable extra resources the Council alone could not manage the entire process of lettings, inspections, site management, etc. without the help of site committees operating under the current semi-devolved structure.
24. Recommendation 13 – some sites do have opportunities to improve health & safety in certain areas and any possible Council funding would be welcome.

25. Recommendation 14 – surveying of trees needs to be completed sooner than ‘by 2022’ and repeated on a regular cycle.
26. Recommendations 15-17 – all efforts encouraging sustainable practices are welcome, although how mains water usage can be reduced is not explained.
27. Appendix 1 – needs to be updated with current plot numbers. ‘Palewell Fields’ should read ‘Palewell Park’ with 29 plots.

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This document has been prepared taking into account discussions held at the quarterly BRAG meeting held in January 2018 attended by representatives of:

Briar Road
Bushy Park
Cavendish House
Hatherop
Hertford Avenue
Manor Road
Mill Road
Old Palace Lane
Palewell Park
Palewell Pavillion
Short Lots
St Anne’s Passage
The Priory
The Triangle
Townmead
Walnut Tree
Westfields

together with further comments from:

Briar Road
Bushy Park
Cavendish House
Hatherop
Palewell Park
Palewell Pavillion
St Anne’s Passage
The Priory
The Triangle
Walnut Tree
Westfields

The remaining sites, with the exception of Queens Road for which we have no contact, have all received the documentation and have not commented:

Brook Road

Heath Gardens

Marsh Farm

Shacklegate Lane

Sixth Cross road

South Close

Howard Fletcher

BRAG Secretary