

## **DORRINGTON ROAD ALLOTMENT ASSOCIATION AGM MINUTES**

18<sup>th</sup> February 2016 19.30 Gregson Centre

Present: Committee: Sean Bolton, Catherine Hird, Ian Hartley, Peter Stanton, Claire Stevens and approximately 25 plot holders

**1. Apologies:** were received by email from several plot holders

**2. Minutes of last AGM:** were agreed to be a true and fair reflection. There were no questions arising. SB suggested that members examine the next set of minutes on the website when they become available and email any questions/comments to the committee.

**3. A review of the previous 12 months (SB):** SB gave this review:

The last year has seen a number of new plot-holders – nearly 20% of plots have been re-let in the year. We have continued to successfully develop some of the large number of previously under-used plots and have made some big steps in improving general utilisation of the far end of the site. There have though been mixed results with a few of the new plot holders – a few of the plots have been fairly tough assignments to turn around and not everyone has been able to put the time into working that is needed to overcome an overgrown plot! So, regrettably, not all re-lets have worked out.

We have proposed a rule change to make probation more aligned to the time needed to take on some challenging plots. That said – and I don't wish to be too gloomy - I'd particularly like to say 'welcome' and 'thank you' to the new faces here and who have made fabulous efforts to take on new plots - and are seeing the result.

The year has also been, probably, one of the most challenging to face - with miserable wet weather for weeks on end making going tough for all of us and whilst some crops such as fruit have been great it has not been the greatest year to be a gardener if like me you do like at least some sun and warmth to dig in!

The committee continues to quietly work in the background to gradually, but firmly, strengthen and professionalise our outlook. --- Our objective is to lay foundations for a long lasting, well used, well maintained and vibrant site - and in the coming year we would like to start work on creating a strategy plan to give a road map for further developing the utilisation of the site, this point is in our view a critical factor to ensure our occupancy and use of the site remains secure for the foreseeable future.

I would like to at this point to record our thanks to the rest of the committee for all their sterling work over the last 12 months. - The committee put in many hours of unpaid and

dedicated effort to keep a structure and organise our community well. – I'm sure you will all join me in 'thanking' them all!

Just before we leave this general topic area, we do have though a second proposed rule update to vote on shortly. This is a new 'rule' to codify the arrangements for placing new structures such as sheds, poly tunnels, ponds, etc. In essence we wish to formalise that new structures should sit wholly within individual (per the site-plans) plot boundaries, so that in future if any multiple plots which are currently with one lessee are split back into their original plots we do not have problems with structures which end up in 2 plots. I would stress, we do not want to retrospectively apply this to any existing structures, so please don't worry about what is there today – but we do want to prevent future problems being created

We are a 'self-managed' site, so keeping our site rules up to date and relevant is vital. I don't need to remind you all that we are collectively charged with the future of the Association and our site could easily be 4 acres of desirable building land – so my message really is let's use it, not risk losing it!

Financially, we have had a reasonably stable year, albeit one where we see the costs of maintaining a large site more clearly illustrated to us, with a much reduced – and in reality pretty thin – surplus to transfer to future reserves. As a committee, we do recommend that a policy of maintaining a sensible buffer or reserve for future 'unknowns' is a vital component of delivering stability and security.

The strategy and the focus proposed by the committee over the next 12 months will remain building for the long term – creating a stable future to meet the conditions of our Council Lease and SLA and by far the most important factor, to secure the site for following years. On this basis we have, implemented a very modest rent increase (25p on a £21 plot - or about ½ of 1 pence per square metre occupied) to reflect the fact key expenses – water, insurance, affiliation fees etc., do rise and are out of our control.

We continue to plan for a responsible position fiscally when the lease renewal eventually comes around in another few years.

**4. Finance report (CH):** Each member received a hard copy of the accounts and CH gave a short summary as follows:

Site improvements: Noticeboard £192 (need identified by plot holder survey), New fence £1100

Water: ¾ of 2014-2015 cost – despite it being a much wetter summer. Plot holders were asked to try and conserve water in water butts or similar as controllable expense.

Skip: Booked for working day, 2/4/2016

Piccadilly Gardens: Only came once last summer – proving unreliable, so we've arranged for another gardener. Much more expensive so will only come at start and end of season. Plot-holders to trim own fronts to keep costs down.

Donation: From a neighbour following installation of green fence.

Plot holder questions:

Q1) What do Piccadilly Gardens actually do?

A: Trim sides of track, trim carpark areas, maintain trackside hedge.

Q2) Does the association have any equipment to enable volunteers to do this work?

A: Not currently. We have a strimmer, but it requires fixing/servicing. We have a mower but this is also a 'non-runner'. Contractors supply and maintain their own equipment. SB to get a price for strimmer repair. (We have been engaging gardening contractors to save the cost of buying, storing and maintaining association equipment and to spread the cost of the contractors amongst all plot holders rather than having the unfair situation of one or two plot holders doing *all* the work involved.)

Q3) A plot holder suggested that we work on water conservation to save money.

A: The committee would welcome any further suggestions on how this can be achieved beyond the usual water butts and guttering on sheds/greenhouses. Please get in contact by email if you have any ideas.

Q4) A plot holder suggested that in the light of the net excess of income over expenses carried forward (£647.42) rents should be reduced.

A: This net excess is due partially to the fact that several plots were let twice after new plot holders relinquished them (the association does not give refunds) (about £400) and also that some work that was expected to be done last year – tree felling of several problem trees identified by plot holders at the last AGM – has not yet been done or paid for. Taking this work into account and assuming a more stable site (with less in year re-lettings) the association has approximately 'broken even'. The *nominal* increase in rents this year is to cover the increased costs of such things as water, NSALG membership, skip hire, etc., which are all rising and are beyond the committee's control. SB stated that it was sensible to retain a certain amount of funds for stability and security in case of contingencies. For example although we are asking the council to pay for a new fence at the north end of the site (between plot 1 and 192 Dorrington Road) we may still have to pay for this ourselves.

Q5) A plot holder asked about the cost of skip hire and how many we intended to get per year.

A: We had 3 skips last year as there was a lot of rubbish on plots left over from previous plot holders and the committee felt that it was unfair to expect the new plot holders to remove it all themselves. This has now been cleared and all the plots are in a much better state so it is expected that we will only require one skip a year at most. The skip for this year will coincide with the working morning (2<sup>nd</sup> April).

**5. Membership report (CS):** Given by CS:

Currently there are 11 vacant plots and 10 on the waiting list.

This is the time of the year when there is a lot of turnaround in plots with people leaving so the waiting list is short. In order to keep our site viable we need to encourage more people onto the waiting list. We all need to promote the association in order to remedy this.

Catherine has printed some A4 size posters for plot holders to put up at their work if possible. Word of mouth is good too, please mention it to friends who might like a plot.

Catherine has put some posters up in various places around Lancaster and has had an article published in the Guardian. We haven't had a lot of response so far, but it is early in the year and the weather has not been very encouraging either.

## **6. Working morning (CS):**

We are planning a working morning on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2016, 10am till 1pm, with light refreshments provided.

There will be a skip and a bonfire.

Ian is to supervise/lead jobs.

Proposed jobs include:

- Staining gate
- Tidying picnic area
- Cleaning up vacant plots
- Maintenance of existing hedges and also planting new hedging: the committee applied for a free hedging pack from the Woodland Trust, the application has been approved and the plants are to be sent in March in time for the work morning. (The pack consists of native plants that are good for wildlife - hawthorn, hazel, holly, dog rose and dog wood)
- We've also applied for free wildflower seed packs but haven't heard about those yet.

Please make an effort to attend, as it's nice to get people together and meeting other plot holders and it saves money as otherwise we have to employ professionals to do the work which can end up increasing rents. Further details by email nearer the time. This will also be on the Facebook page. They're our allotments – let's get together to look after them.

## **7. Site improvements and maintenance (IH). Ian gave a report on this:**

This will only be a brief report because there haven't been any. Some were planned, but we were let down by a couple of contractors early on in the season, and a third, who was appointed late in the year, was held back by poor weather and wet ground conditions. This year, it is clear we will have to tie contractors down to stricter time limits and dates. We used to hope it would not be necessary to employ outside contractors, and that all site maintenance work could be shared out and dealt with by volunteer plot holders, but it never worked out that way, hence the need to contract, at least some of the work out. In doing so, we have to bear in mind that allotment rents have always been commercially unrealistic and incredibly low. I'm not saying this shouldn't be the case, but when we employ contractors, or buy or hire things, we are thrust into the real world, and have to pay

at going rates, so what may seem like a large bank balance, could quickly be wiped out. My point is, income only trickles in, but expenditure could potentially gush out. It is important that we keep the site in good order, and remove any signs of deterioration and decline. As Sean has already mentioned, councils are now having to think the unthinkable, when it comes to finding building land to combat the undeniable housing crisis. Whilst I am not aware that there is at present, a direct threat to this site, we must realise that it would be one of the easiest to develop, simply as a continuation of Dorrington Road. If the site starts to look under used and in parts derelict, we are playing right into the hands of those who may wish to take it for building. Under these circumstances, we couldn't claim that we were making good use of the land, and it would be difficult to justify our occupation of the site. This is one of the main reasons we have plot inspections, to encourage you to make full use of your plots. We are not being officious or critical, it is just that we are trying to sustain the future of the site, by keeping it looking vibrant and alive. I would ask everyone to do what they can towards this end.

I hope a good number of you will turn out at the next Working Day on Saturday April 2<sup>nd</sup> mainly to carry out necessary pruning/topping work on the boundary hedge to the woodland. This is something which we could manage perfectly well ourselves, with sufficient labour, as it is a labour intensive job, which would otherwise be expensive to put out to contractors. In preparation for this, I would ask any of you with plots bordering the woodland, to ensure that access to the hedge is clear, so that people can work easily and safely in the proximity of the hedge. Disposal of arisings could be an issue, and to avoid having to carry them over long distances, it may be necessary to burn them on plots, where open space permits. Tools will need to be brought by members themselves as the association does not have a stock of tools. Details of which tools would be useful will be included in the invitation email.

**8. Security matters (PS):** PS gave the meeting a brief report, the main points being:

- Always lock the gate every time you use it and ensure that the bars are put firmly into the concrete holes. This will increase security and hopefully prolong the life of the gate.
- The hedging by the woods needs to be maintained. Last year one plot holder laid her hedge creating a large gap that could be walked through. PS tackled a group of teenagers who had walked through from the woods (one of whom appeared to have a small calibre rifle).

There were several questions on this:

Q1) What should plot holders do if they see any intruders/feel threatened.

A: Walk away (calmly) and **contact the police** and appraise them of the situation. No one should put themselves in any danger. If anything happens/is spotted please let the committee know too. The committee reiterated that although this sounds alarming the allotments are a very safe place (the only trouble has been occasional minor vandalism e.g. breakage of greenhouse glass, pilfering of items of garden furniture, etc.).

A plot holder stated that the woods are a meeting place for local youngsters and the local CSO is aware and often checks the woods.

There was a discussion about the relative merits (and definitions of) of 'topping' (cutting off some of the height of the hedge to thicken it) as opposed to 'laying' the hedge (which involves cutting a large amount off the height but making it thicker lower down). It was agreed that although laying can give a thicker hedge in the long run it does create a much lower hedge with big gaps in the short term. It is also a skilled job that takes some time to learn to do properly. Topping on the other hand is less skilled – quicker to do and quicker to learn. It was mooted that for the short term topping is required immediately – to be done at the working morning – to try to increase security. The committee will also look into the viability of laying the hedge e.g. costs, availability of suitable volunteers, hedge/fence combo etc. as a longer term solution.

**9. Proposed rule changes (SB):** Two changes to the rules had been proposed and the plot holders had been notified in advance as per the rules:

A – To extend the maximum period of probation from 3 months to 6 to allow for flexibility taking into account the poor condition of some plots.

B – To forbid the siting of **new** structures such as greenhouses, sheds, poly tunnels and ponds over plot boundaries by members who garden more than one plot. This is in the members' best interest as it will allow ease of splitting plots back up if the member decides to give up a plot at a later date (this would not be applied retrospectively – no current structures would be required to be moved).

SB invited comment/opinion. Both of these rule changes were thought to be sensible and reasonable and were agreed unanimously by the plot holders so will be put into place.

**10. Committee nominations (SB):** There had been no nominations put forward for new/replacement committee members. The existing committee (as previously stated 4 weeks prior to the meeting) put themselves forward for another year of service. This was proposed and seconded by Graham Jameson and John Yarnall and was passed without dissent.

## **11. A.O.B.**

CH talked about holding a new plot holder survey in 2016 to find out what the plot holders themselves want. She asked for plot holders to email suggestions for questions that can be added to the survey to get plot holders opinions. If anyone has anything can they please email it to the committee.

Q1) What is the councils role in running the allotments?

A) SB explained that the council have passed the management of the allotments onto the plot holders themselves in the form of an elected committee for each site (made up of plot holders from that site). This is to save the council money. There is some occasional council involvement such as during the council's 'boundary dispute' with a neighbour. They do informally inspect the sites (when attending on other business) and as has happened in

other areas of the country could seek to consolidate what they see as underused sites e.g. if they had several sites with less than full occupancy they might seek to close one site (and so free up valuable building land) and move the occupants to other underused sites. It is therefore in the plot holder's interests to maintain a viable site with full occupancy and no derelict plots.

**12. New gate codes:** Were given out both before and after the meeting.