

BDAC –EGM on 26th January 2013 [postponed from 19th January 2013]

Agenda – to discuss proposed changes to management services to allotments

Alderman Brenda Clarke as President of BDAC opened meeting.

Welcomed all, it was a good turnout – 3 allotment officers present.

Chairman thanked all those helped clear roads and introduced Peter Short
[Parks Facilities Manager]

Peter Short

“Jaws of Doom” - £620 ^{million} needed to be saved. Parks Dept had had 36% reduction over 5 years. More needed – 50% reduction in repairs and maintenance budget. Council wanted a full recovery cost – this would mean a **rent increase to £110+ with effect from 2014**. The recent rent increase had led to **drop in plot tenancies from 92% to 79%**. Need for Allotment Dept/Site Committees and BDAC to attain future sustainability. With proposed changes in services it was hoped that any rent increases would be in line with inflation. The aim was to obtain agreement by April 2014 before further cuts made.

At moment rents covered 38% income.

Emphasis made that **proposals** were just that **NO decisions made**.

Area mentors/coordinators to take on roles involving about 10 plots seemed a good idea.

City trying to work to achieve realistic solutions.

Clive Birch

BDAC Executive had agreed that it would not be taking on role of managing sites but would be proactive in trying to ensure all sites had some means of being managed. Meeting was opened to questions.

Devolving Budget

Q. Would allocated **budgets** be **realistic**?

A. **Water costs** would be based on last 3 average seasons and based on formula per tenants plus plot size. It was hoped that improper water usage would be curtailed. BCC wasn't legally obliged to provide water only land.

Q. How would **shortfalls** be met in future if budgets cut?

A. Once full cost recovery target achieved no budget cuts should be made.

Q. If water bill reduced would there be a **“clawback”**?

A. **No** once budget allocated that was it.

Q. Are **budgets** set on **vacant plots**?

A. **No, based on tenancies**, therefore, increase in tenants would mean increase to income for site.

Q. How would **budgets** be affected by **inflation**?

A. Rents expected to be in line with inflation.

Q. Was there an intention to get **rid of sites** through **tenant loss**.

A. **No**, no intention of closing sites, present procedure looks at **viability** of a site.

Q. What **notice** will be given for **budget allocation**?

A. **As soon as they are known**. Hoped draft agreement would be out January 1st 2014, **no agreement until figures known**.

Q. What percentage of rents will be devolved?

A. There would in future be **ONE agreement** for all sites. All would receive **same % of rents**.

Q. How are **misusers of water** to be dealt with?

A. Strict rules in place. One chance given then. C. Birch said it was important to back up committees. Important decisions based on witness statement[s] without prejudice.

Q. Is **acceptance** of proposals down to **individual plot holders**?

A. It was for **associations** to make decision at **AGMs/EGMs**.

Q. Will **BCC** still be **landlords**?

A. **Yes**.

Q. What will **legal responsibilities** of **BCC** be in proposed changes?

A. To be agreed after final questions known during process of discussion and **Legal Services will decide**.

Q. Would budget **cover problems** such as knotweed, bridges, watercourses?

A. Emergency contingencies could help matched funding.

It was recognised this needed further consideration.

Q. Would **accounts** need to be **audited** for **BCC**?

A. Hoped this would not be **avoided**.

Q. Would there be **training** and support packages?

A. **Training offered**. Essential for "new" rent collectors.

Q. Was there an **opt out**?

A. **No**, other than dissolving association.

Q. Could cooperatives be formed or **full self-management** attained?

A. It was thought full self-management was a step too quick but could be a **consideration in the future**. Any decisions had to be manageable.

Q. What was cost of allotments in budget?

A. About 1%.

Q. Had City been approached by any **charity or private body** to run allotments?

A. No, City retaining legal areas, public liability will be needed.

Q. Will sites actually **get money**?

A. **Yes**.

Q. Would **expenses** be paid?

A. Legitimate expenses should be covered, no one should be out of pocket.
New roles would need training.

Q. Will **council control** how **money** is spent?

A. **No, but** associations would be advised of issues following risk assessment and would need to consider its actions for Health & Safety. It was important that associations protected themselves. Common sense should prevail.

Q. Who would **elect this new level of management**?

A. The **local group** of allotments – important that those elected would not be **BDAC Exec. Members**.

Q. How would **occupancy of sites** be known?

A. **Exact vacancies** was difficult on a day to day basis, however, website and the Big Dig project, local reps and available association details would help fill sites.

It was recognised that running sites required adequate funding which included grants etc.

Q. What would be imposed on **treasurers**?

A. Payment of bills, insurances, expenditure of money given to association.

Proper systems would make this **easier**. The basic management of site would be less demanding than having social events, running a shop – it was for **associations to decide** on level of running a site.

Q. Would a **spraying licence** be needed?

A. **No** - licence required for commercial spraying – this wouldn't apply to associations doing own spraying.

Q. Can direct **payment of rent to landlord** be stopped?

A. **No** but a **commission** towards management of site **would be looked at**.

Q. **Organisations** that rent plots pay directly to City – could commission be considered in these cases?

A. A **10% commission** could be considered.

Q. Will associations be able to use **own contractors**?

A. Yes, but it was essential to ensure contractors carried **proper liability**.

Q. Can sites be named and shamed over **water use**.

A. No, in future water issues would affect individual sites, it was vital to expand the good practice found on some sites.

Q. How would **evictions** be carried out?

A. **As happens now** but second level of management could be involved and then BDAC if still a problem.

Q. Can **VAT** be claimed back?

A. **No** City cannot claim back VAT.

Q. Would City **claim unspent moneys** back?

A. **No**, as for “water money” saved, no claw back.

Q. How will **risk assessment** be done?

A. Risk assessments have to be done **by City**, common sense needed.

Mitigated risks need to be **recorded** and also response those risks.

City will provide regular newsletter of progress.

City Officer left meeting at 16.40 by arrangement with Chairman with thanks from meeting.

The remaining time was Q to & A from Chairman and Secretary of BDAC.

Q. How would **outstanding R & M issues** be dealt with?

A. **Each association** would need to **decide** what work was outstanding then decide which **work they could do** – some sites relied on City too much.

Then **discuss with City**.

Q. Is **BDAC upto changes**?

A. In its present operation no, BUT it will change rapidly to ensure it will be a strong leader in the proposed changes. The present exec members numbered 21, the roles would have to change, some of them may wish to go into the second level of managing sites.

BDAC website would need to be managed effectively.

Q. Could BDAC look at obtaining **blanket insurance cover** for associations?

A. **No insurance company** will provide **blanket cover** because each site was an individual entity but associations had found different companies to provide public liability. **Employers liability** needed to be considered, cover costs for **smaller sites** was a concern. BDAC will put details on website.

A. How would proposed **new structure** work?

Q. Start with associations managing site,
grouped in groups of about 10 depending on local distribution of sites
coordinator[s] elected for each group, an individual may not be willing!
BDAC Executive to support all and in particular the coordinators
BDAC Exec to arbitrate on issues as required
Allotment Dept. as landlords and carrying out agreed responsibilities.

There were going to be changes **one way or another**. Our task was to ensure plot holders/associations had the **best conditions** which **they took on and not have imposed**.

All decisions would be through associations/tenants.

BDAC Exec would be giving support, answer questions etc.

BDAC Officers aware that ultimately Cabinet Members made decisions [apropos rent increase].

Another meeting would take place **beginning of April**, while a time scale had been suggested, while we recognised the key times, it was **essential** associations/plot holders **had all the information** at hand to enable a decision to be made.

Future documents from City Officer should be endorsed by higher authority to give more confidence in proposals.

We need to take this opportunity to shape the future of allotments in Birmingham.

Thanks given to Bordesley Green for hosting meeting and to those providing refreshments.

Chairman closed meeting at 17.15.