

## barnet allotment federation

# CURRENT ISSUES – FUTURE PROBLEMS?

Notes of the workshop held on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2014

The workshop examined those current issues and situations on Barnet's allotment sites which might develop over time into major problems which could threaten the allotment society concerned, its site or its community of people. The aim was to identify possible early warning signs that such problems were developing and to suggest possible actions to address them, so as to avoid a problem becoming a crisis. The workshop divided into three groups respectively looking at managing the society, managing the people and managing the site. This note summarises the main points raised in each group.

### **Managing the society**

The following were among the main topics discussed:

#### ***Falling waiting list and an increasing number of vacant plots***

Conduct regular plot inspections to identify problems early.

Offer assistance for plot-holders who are not coping.

Use half plots for new starters to assess their ability to cope with a full plot and commitment. It is important to match newcomers to plots that match their capabilities.

Have an active lettings secretary/officer who maintains the waiting list - contacting those on the waiting list at regular intervals (3-6 months) to determine if they are still interested. Use text messaging/e-mail.

#### ***Lack of willing candidates for the committee***

Share roles so that they do not become too onerous for one person and this will assist succession planning.

Conduct a skills survey and co-opt society members where specific skills are required.

Document procedures to assist with training new members or when key individuals are absent for long periods.

Produce a volunteer list – identify the right person who has the skills to engage with other plot-holders.

Get the message to all plot-holders that it is their allotment society not the committee's, and that all have a responsibility to contribute to the society.

Establish working groups with non-committee members recognising that members may want to help but may not be able or want to attend committee meetings.

#### ***Continuously falling financial reserves***

Ensure the treasurer is competent and active.

Treasurer to have an "assistant/co-opted colleague" to work with them - part of succession planning and insurance against long term absence.

Treasurer must present regular reports to the society.

Financial planning is essential – long and short term.

Identify essential capital projects.  
Prioritise projects into essential and desirable.

Use the Federation spreadsheet and other advice on the BAF website.

Have a realistic idea of income when forward planning - don't assume 100% occupancy.

### ***Financial Irregularities and Fraud***

Treasurer must present regular reports to the society.

Ensure the accounts are independently audited at least annually.

At least 2 signatories for society expenditure.

For large capital spends obtain prior agreement from society members.

### **Managing the people**

The following were amongst the main topics discussed:

#### ***Handling inter-personal problems within the site or within the committee; dissent within the committee paralysing business***

Some sites did not communicate with members – letters or email - they have members 'come to us'. Others reacted to verbal or written complaints submitted to committee members. Larger sites have web pages and links to the Federation site for communication.

All agreed that the Field Plot Stewards/Managers were invaluable in dealing with day to day issues.

Forming a small executive committee to form policy or in looking at the long term strategy of the site was considered important and essential for a well-run site. This led to less time wasting at Committee Meetings and avoided long winded discussion with the end result being that no constructive decisions are taken. Some societies required a vote before a decision was taken – others did not require this type of formal approach.

All agreed that major decisions were put forward at AGMs with working groups tasked for specific projects.

A general understanding by all members of a site of the 'rules' was considered essential, made more so by the difference in nationalities on many sites. To say interpretation of the rules lost something in the translation was again common across the group discussion. Conclusion: sites should all have general rules and the committee must stand up to enforce them as required.

#### ***Finding a firm but friendly approach with allotment holders and others***

The Sergeant Major approach was considered effective in some cases leading to formal letters of a warning or and in serious cases eviction with termination of leases. While for some, diplomacy and having time in listening provided equal resolutions to member's complaints with no further action required.

The stick and carrot approach was by far favoured by the majority in the group backed up by having a readily understandable complaints procedure.

#### ***The risks of being too robust and swash-buckling in dealing with people of all sorts***

Any escalation of disputes must involve the chair and secretary of the society. Copies of exchanged correspondence kept and the committee briefed when required. Individual committee members must not take it upon themselves to 'resolve matters' - this in most cases tends to escalate further members complaints/grievances. Any incidents involving neighbours or outside agencies must again be conducted by the chair or secretary and a diary of events and action taken kept for future reference.

### ***Increasing complaints from neighbouring residents***

Again Field Plot Stewards / Field Managers must be contacted immediately problems arise with neighbouring residents. Simple things such as taking into consideration of bonfires blowing excessive clouds of smoke across their property (and indeed neighbouring plots when being worked by the plot holder).

Most sites fostered good relations. Sending out or advertising Open Days to invite residents to come along and see just what it is allotmenters do on their plots helps relationships, more so when offered a cup of tea and a cabbage or courgette!

### ***Could the committee adjust their own approach in order to improve a seemingly intractable people issue***

It would appear the more settled sites have a committee where each member of the committee has a specified or allocated job. There would appear to be many members of an allotment committee who find it difficult to enforce the rules.

In addition to the yearly AGM and the six committee meetings (notice of which are published on field notice boards) at which members are asked to make known their problems or complaints, some have suggestion boxes and others rely on the personal approach and personality of individual outspoken committee members to carry the day.

The publishing of a 'Forecast of Events' including delivery dates for compost, manure, opening times for trading huts etc.

One site holds informal field meetings twice a year to allow discussion and the airing of complaints between other plot holders and or complaints directed at the committee and vice versa.

Most Committee Members we found bend over backward when faced with genuine complaints rather than grumble and moans. Hence the disproportionate amount of time taken listening and talking with members when visiting the site and the amount of time working their plots!

### ***Summary***

As always the discussion brought up a whole range of thoughts - Committees being pro-active rather than re-active. Committee members with specified roles and responsibilities were considered to be more beneficial to the membership as a whole. Arranging social events, shows, and barbeques or arranging and providing an area with a simple cup of tea/coffee on a Sunday morning for societies - involving as many members as possible was thought a good idea to nip in the bud possible issues arising.

Getting to know other members was considered an essential issue – the ways and variety of gardening by members was again a way of understanding each other's culture.

How one reaches the standard of an ideal committee with the ability to involve all members of the society is we believe achievable – for most societies it remains a wish rather than (for the moment) reality.

### **Managing the site**

The following were among the main topics discussed:

#### ***Planning maintenance and repair work***

It was essential for the society, particularly the committee, to plan maintenance and repair work in the short and long term. If this is neglected then repairs might be left so long that major work would then be needed and this might be unaffordable;

**warning sign:** - *the committee failing to make longer term plans or to update them regularly;*

**possible action:** - *get on and make a longer term plan*

### **Taking decisions**

It was sometimes tempting to put off about some jobs even when it was quite obvious that they needed to be done, perhaps because of uncertainty about how best to tackle them. Equally, the people charged with organising the work could fail to get on with it. This again could allow a problem to get worse;

**warning sign:** - *inability to take decisions about what to do and how*

**possible action:** - *more decisiveness on the part of the main officer(s)*

**warning sign:** - *inability to get on with the job once it's been decided upon*

**possible action:** - *put someone with drive in charge of the work and let them get on with it*

### **Volunteers and contractors**

There was often a choice whether to use contractors for maintenance and repair work or to rely on volunteers working free or at mates rates. The latter was the cheaper option as long as the volunteers were dependable – some 'volunteers' say they will help but never quite get round to doing anything;

**warning sign:** - *volunteers don't deliver or drag their feet excessively and, in the end, contractors are needed*

**possible actions:** - *carry out a skills survey to increase the pool of possible volunteers*

- *use social events to chat people up and get them enthused*

- *try to ensure that volunteers get some reward for their efforts*

- *be realistic about who is likely to deliver in a timely and satisfactory manner*

### **Safety and health**

Allotment societies have safety and health responsibilities and any accidents could have serious or expensive consequences. 'Useful bits and pieces' - i.e. rubbish - accumulated by allotment holders on their plots or elsewhere on the site can be a prime source of safety hazards which can build up over time;

**warning sign:** - *lack of regular safety inspections by the committee*

**possible action:** - *check for possible hazards during regular plot inspections*

- *use newsletters or posters to help allotment holders to understand what can be a hazard on their plots*

**warning sign:** - *persistent build-up of rubbish on plots or on the site generally*

**possible action:** - *periodic de-cluttering exercises perhaps using working parties*

### **Barnet Allotment Federation**

September 2014