

Allotment & Environment Committee

26 July 2022

5pm Town Council Offices, Kingsway, Bishop Auckland

Present: Cllr J Blackburn (Chair), Cllr S Zair (Vice-Chair) Cllr K Eliot and Cllr A Zair

Also Present: Sarah Harris, Town Clerk & Vicki Booth Deputy Clerk

Representatives from Edgehill, Pollards, Tindale and South Church Allotment Sites

1 Member of the Public

AEC001/22 - Apologies for absence – Were received from Cllr H Balmer Howison as he was at work.

Resolved: That the apologies were noted and received.

AEC002/22 - Declarations of interest from members on any item on the agenda, including any interest prejudicial or personal as recorded on the Members register of interests.

Resolved: That no declarations were made

AEC003/22 - Public Participation - To hear from any members of the public subject to Public Participation Policy. The public were reminded that the section as per the policy is for 15 minutes in total. Each person may speak once for 3 minutes only in respect of business itemised on the agenda in relation to written questions. No written questions were received in advance of the meeting. A verbal question or statement concerning an item on the agenda asked by a member of the public during a public questions session at a meeting will normally be taken into account during the subsequent discussion of that agenda item. However, the Chairman may also direct that a response to a question posed by a member of the public be referred to a Councillor for an immediate oral response or to an employee for a written or oral response.

The Chair opened public participation, and said it would be moved to the end of the meeting to ensure that reports could be heard as they may answer questions.

AEC004/22 - Report of the Town Clerk:

AEC004.1/22 General Allotment update was given by the Town Clerk, including an update on Allotment Mapping and Maintenance and Work Programmes.

Allotment Mapping

- Initial site visits have been undertaken, and the maps are being drawn up. Pollards is the most complicated due to the centre line down the middle plots now being very fragmented and not straight.
- Ariel Photos of each site are also going to be being taken to ensure that the council have up to date records.
- Next stage will be that once initial maps have been drawn up, then an open day will need to be held where people are able to come in to look at the map of their plot and then dispute where boundaries are if necessary. This is likely to be in September but could fall into October.
- Full communication of this will be given to tenants. Assurance was given that this process was being undertaken to improve Council records.

Resolved: That members welcomed the work and noted the report. They look forward to seeing the new mapping at the next meeting.

Maintenance and Work Programmes There has been no forward work plan for some time associated with the Allotment service to ensure that sites are being maintained, developed and appropriately utilised. Therefore, maintenance and work programmes are being drawn up. Sites need some investment to get them to a good standard. Site risk assessments are also being developed to help address where the priority works need to start.

Initial findings are that:

- Drainage works are needed at Tindale site – apparently this was planned for 2020 but then due to the pandemic didn't happen. New quotes are being sought and will be brought to a future meeting for sign off.
- New signage and notice boards are needed across sites. Quotes are being sought.
- Tree/ hedge maintenance is needed on all sites.

Resolved: That all Members agreed the report and welcomed the proactive planning. They look forward to receiving an update report to the next meeting.

Site inspections - As part of mapping basic inspections of the condition of sites overall have been undertaken. However, lots need to be addressed therefore set inspection dates will be issued to tenants to give an opportunity to get plots up to standard before inspections take place and to ensure that the Council can access every plot. Inspection dates will be issued to sites by the end of July.

Resolved: That members welcomed the inspections, and where possible committee members should be present at the inspections.

AEC004.2/22 - Service standards, contact arrangements & Association relationships –

Service Standards - A report was given on the need to address the above. Some sites regularly receive more support from the Council than others due to service demands which are starting to impact upon other areas of Council business therefore it is being recommended that some service standard timescales are developed to have clearer expectations.

Resolved: That Members agreed to work with the Clerk to develop service standards over the next couple of months including:

- Length of time acceptable to receive notification of the outcome following an application for a shed/ structure
- Length of time acceptable to receive response to an issue raised etc.
- Length of time acceptable to allocate to vacant plots
- Agreed rental rates for community plots
- Agreed rental rates for part year tenancies
- Agreed timescales for accepted levels of cultivation progress for plots
- Etc

Contact Arrangements - To start with a consistent service a designated email address has been implemented to ensure that all allotment correspondence goes via this email allotments@bishopauckland-tc.gov.uk to lessen some demand on staff. Telephone queries and service will still be provided, but instant outcomes to queries may not always be possible.

Resolved: That Members agreed the report and welcomed the email address to lessen pressure on staff. A plea was given to tenants and associations to allow staff to respond to emails rather than instantly calling as well as emailing as that doubled the demand. That members note the report, and agree that the service standards be brought to the next meeting.

Association Relationships – It was reported that across the 8 sites, 4 hard associations in place. Of which each were very different, and needed to have different approaches and relationships in place. Most have constitutions, however many had not been updated for sometime, only one had a form of agreement in place with the Council, however this is outdated and needs updating. The one with an agreement in place is the one site which is fully self- managed, however the Council did still have some responsibilities and the Association do also have responsibilities to keep the Council informed of activities etc but it would appear that since the pandemic that this hasn't been happening.

Other associations were also all very different too which makes having a consistent service to the association and all tenants very complex.

Resolved: That Members agreed to look at the relationships with each site and develop an agreement which sets out the relationship and responsibilities for each association. There would be some differences in the agreements as one size fits all approach may not work, as some sites are one land leased by the council from a private land lord for example. Some draft models will be brought to the next meeting.

Request Association Constitution's be updated to a model constitution to ensure consistency and transparency.

AEC004.3/22 - Allotment Tenancies – an update was given on the current status of the tenancies for 2022 and 2022-23. 2022 – part year tenancies and rent letters have been issued to all sites including a copy of the current Allotment Rules and Regulations, which apply to all site, including association sites. Town Council Rules must be followed, additional association rules association sites must be agreed with the Council, and must be complimentary to the Council rules.

Chasing letters have been issued for those with outstanding payments and paperwork.

Additional paperwork has been requested from Associations and Community Plots including Risk Assessments, and Insurance documentation. Annual reports on use of the community Plots have also been requested.

Some Association sites don't have separate insurance or Risk Assessments therefore this needs to be addressed. For £3 per member each association can get insurance via national allotment society get insurance further details of this can be brought to the next meeting.

Town Clerk is developing Risk Assessments for each site.

Assurance was given as to why the tenancy year was moving from 1st April to 31st march to 1st November to 31st October. It was to be in-line with other services across the County, it was easier for the council to manage the income, as this time of year as it didn't impact with the year-end processes and the main one it enables those taking on a plot at the start of a tenancy year to enable them to have produce set ready for the summer growing season, an April start hinders this. It also means those completing a summer growing seasons, can come off at the end without the plot going to disrepair over the winter.

Resolved: That all Members agreed and welcomed the change in process. A full report on report on rental income and site costs has been requested for the meeting and for discussion with the Finance Committee.

AEC004.4/22 - Allotment Waiting Lists & Plot Allocations – an update was given which included:

- All those on waiting list have been written to which has reduced the list.
- There are vacant plots at
 - Edge hill – two of which are being filled – awaiting information on a couple more.

- Woodhouse – has a few vacant plots, some clearing has been undertaken, however some further remedial works are needed, however some allocations may be able to be made.
- Service standards need to be agreed surrounding rent for part year plots, and those in need of major remedial works and cultivation. Council needs to agree if they are happy to give additional discount on very overgrown plots initially, as whilst a free period is attractive is someone has paid a nominal charge then they are more likely to engage. Think we also need to impose an expected level of progress after a certain amount of time.
- Pollards – large former show growers plot is vacant – agreed in principle that it could be used as a community plot. However, this comes with additional responsibilities for the Council to manage which at this time is complex.
An alternative option would be to offer the plot to another tenant who expressed to the Council early 2021 that they would like a larger plot as their current half plot isn't as accessible as they wish. This tenant currently 'shared lives' service to adults with disabilities, and this plot would adapt very well to have disabled access and facilities. This tenant would be prepared to take on this plot, provided the Council assists with some remedial works on the dangerous elements. If they were able to take the plot now they would be in a position to give up their half plot early next year for a new grower.

Resolved: That all members were in agreement that:

- That vacant plots be offered to those on waiting list for Woodhouse Close, with proviso that the council are aware that some remedial works are needed which the new tenants may need some help with which can then be brought back to the Council for agreement.
- That have a community plot at the Pollards is at this time too complex when there is many other workstreams which the Council are managing. Therefore the Members were unanimous in agreement that the Plot be allocated to an existing tenant, to enable development of a plot suitable for their family and their shared live service users. The Council will pay for the immediate remedial works dismantling of the dangerous structures and removal of the waste. It was agreed that this would bring the maximum benefit and get the plots back into use quickly.
- That as part of the service standards and changes to rental year, a more streamlined process for plot allocations be adopted.

AEC004.5/22 - Rules and regulations Consultation - The current rules and regulations need some attention to ensure that they are fit for purpose, and that they are very clear in setting out expectations. It is proposed to run a consultation on some proposed changes during September 2022 to ensure tenants have the opportunity to comment. The Horticulture show will be used as a vehicle for the consultation. No major changes are expected, other than greater clarity around certain topics such as what the council deems to be cultivation, what is classed as a structure, whether fires are permitted and if they are what are the rules. Etc. it is hoped that the consultation bring clarity to plot holders. Without clearer rules it is harder for the council to hold tenants to account, which can bring distress and angst to other tenants when they view the council as not acting etc.

Resolved: That Members welcome the consultation, and they will review the draft documentation before it released for consultation at the next meeting.

AEC004.6/22 - Horticulture Show 2022 - Scheduled for Sat 24th September 2022 in No.42 Market Place. Initial advertisement is out to tenants, via newsletter in the late spring. Infrastructure, such as venue, and tables etc has been booked. Schedule of classes has been proposed by Events committee, (will be tabled at the meeting) these will be live online by the end of July. Looking to do further engagement with schools etc to build on success of last year.

Recommended: That members noted the report, and that Event Committee would agree the classes and scheduled. That the show be apart of the rules and regulations consultation.

AEC005/22 – Public Participation the Chair opened public participation now that reports had been heard.

Liz Drake Secretary of the Pollards Association. Asked:

- Has Agreement that came out has that been on other sites prior to this year?
- There are differences between the old and new tenancy. This agreement does not conform to the current sets of rules that we have been working to since 2015. These have been sneaked in and it wasn't consulted about.
- Gate is twisted and latch very still and causing damage to post.

Response by Town Clerk, as directed by the Chair:

- The Tenancy Agreement it is based upon what other areas such as South Tyneside and DCC , this was brand new to BA sites to ensure that Tenants knew which rules they were agreeing as old practices of just signing a box against a plot number is not robust enough.
- Agree whilst the 7 month tenancies are not perfect, it is hoped that issues will be ironed out when the new tenancy come in to play in November.
- Gate will be reported to the contractor.

The Chair Recommended separate meeting with Pollards to look at the issues

Phil Representative of SOUTH CHURCH Association. Asked:

- Do you know the date that South Church became self-regulated?
- As far as we are concerned the self-regulation was the best thing that happened as it works. We have never asked for refunds and it seems to work well. It may be that if you go down that route we might be that we end up reverting back to how it used to be.
- How are you going to change the rent date, what was the logic behind that

Response by Town Clerk, as directed by the Chair:

- The agreement will be over 15 years old, we haven't had regular meetings as per the agreement and this hasn't happened e.g. we are supposed to have a meeting prior to the annual meeting so that we are there to support and we work better together.
- Chair commented it is more about regulating our services and we get our bit right.
- It is around making sure we have the resources to handle that effectively and it is a busy time for our year end accounts, moving in line with the growing season means the plot is left for some time. It was a recommendation from the Northern Counties Allotment Association and DCC. This can be raised when we go out to consultation.

General debate ensued:

- Liz from the Pollards – Feb might be better to change the date to.
 - Chair – Asked the Clerk to look at this as a possibility. SH to look at this as a possibility
- Cllr Sam Zair, we do want to listen we are wanting to improve relationships.
- Chair – we will try and manage the consultation better

- Phil from South Church – People are used to one thing and change isn't always good but this was done before consultation was thought about.
 - Town Clerk - A lot of what has been reported today is from feedback of what tenants are telling us, and from issues associations have had well as meet our statutory regulations
- Tenant from Pollards – why not stipulate in the tenancy agreement that people need to give so much notice before coming off a plot and that they are responsible for maintenance until the termination date.
 - Clerk - Some people do just wait and make that decision when they get their next bill which causes problems, that is why we are trying to improve the information in tenancies and the rules. As if someone hasn't seen the rules for over 15 years it makes it more complex.
- Phil – South Church Cost of removing stuff – most contain clause of how you found it. We have come across this recently that we have had to pay to clear plots, they should be sent a bill
 - Clerk - Moving forward that is what we plan to do but the rules haven't been included in the tenancy and that should be resolved going forward. Things should be tighter going forward and they will be charged if we get it in place and all done correctly. A regular inspection process will also help.
- John Wake – representative of Tindale Site asked Algae is a stagnant pond, which was installed by the Council over 15 years ago. It is at the stage now where I am struggling to sort it out. Is there a National Trust or someone who can come in and help or give advice?
 - Members of the public suggestion of a solar powered pump as an option.
 - Clerk – this is something we can discuss further with the association and get some costs.
 - The Chair agreed.
- Liz Pollards – As an Association holding insurance and on a number of occasions you would expect if you, the council come onto site we should have some notification before you arrive.
 - Chair – As it is a site owned or leased by the council permission isn't needed to come on to the site. Plus Councillors and town council workers we have our own insurance and we would be covered and not be liable.
- Brian – rep of South Church site - 7 days' notice of any contractors coming on site should be given to associations.
 - CHAIR – The association is not liable for work we have arranged on site that is BATC liability
- The Chair confirmed that the date and time of the next meeting would be confirmed in due course after the summer recess.