BDAC Executive Meeting

Venue: Northleigh Road Allotments

Minutes of the Exec of 15th September 2024

Present: Keith Yardley (Chairing), David Read (Chair), Hester Blewitt (Sec), Yvonne Brookes (Treas), Len Tubbs, Tony Webb, Kerry McGahey, Kate Martin Smith, Cheryl Butler, Clive Fenn

Apologies: Ross White (received earlier this week), Andrew Large (received this morning) Stuart Guest sent apologies by email 13.52 (not well). Absent: Dave Reece

John (Leslie) Whitaker & Luke Richards have both resigned since the last meeting in August. John's resignation was on health grounds and not feeling able to contribute anything; Luke says he will help with shows in the future. Thanks will be sent to them. Co-options would be possible to replace those resigning.

Note: The current Chair David Read is recovering, Keith Yardley is standing in as Interim Chair for August, September and October meetings only.

Minutes to the Exec of 10th August: Due to email problems the latest version showing a correction had not been circulated but was available in the room on screen. It was agreed that both today's minutes and those of August and June 2024 which also contained corrections would be circulated with today's papers for final review.

Matters arising from the minutes of the August Executive

1. HB confirmed that details have been passed to Kerry and Dave Reece regarding the Growing Birmingham project and to BOSF Chair Chris Blythe who will be convening next meeting; he has been informed that Kerry is only available evenings on week days.
2. The meeting was comfortable with the format and structure of the August minutes
3. HB has circulated a note of our earlier definition of a Conflict of Interest:
   (United Kingdom Research Institute – The government agency charged with these things defines a Conflict of Interest as a situation in which an individual's ability to exercise judgement or act in one role is, could be or is seen as impaired or otherwise influenced by their involvement in another role or relationship) The meeting agreed it is to be used as our standard definition.
4. A question was asked regarding insurance and the size of any sign used to identify a pond. There seems to be no specific size stated as long as it is legible to a person on the plot. Plot holders can make their own or obtain one commercially.
5. **Action**: HB to resend the Complaints summary to Exec members
6. It was confirmed that BDAC has at present no agreed policies although recommended policies have been drafted for Association guidance as part of training and development.
7. BDAC postal address: For FCA registration, we need a proper postal address and as we haven't got a safe one based at an allotment site, we are currently using the Chair's home address. It was confirmed that an allotment site has to ask the Post Office to allocate it a formal address which then goes onto their database.
   Action: All Exec members to ask their own sites if they are willing to install a safe, secure post box on their gate and become our registered postal address. This would mean checking a post

box daily and forwarding items to an Exec member. The Exec will then approach the post office.

8. **Action**: The selection, roles and duties of our auditors was referred to the **Finance working group** to agree. It was noted that lay members are acceptable providing they are not also on our Executive.

Chairs Report: Keith circulated and read through his report which has also been agreed by David Read, copy is included below. The meeting confirmed that it should refer to the FCA (Financial Conduct Authority) and not general government.

Secretary's Report (HB)

1. Having reviewed the complaints and other information sources available it is clear that plot holders want to use their plots for a wider variety of uses than the current tenancy agreement allows e.g. they want play areas, to use them as leisure gardens, commercial growing including monoculture, to rear a variety of livestock more than chickens and bees. Given that the tenancy agreement is from the Council as landlord it is out of our jurisdiction.
   Action: BDAC Officers to raise at our next meeting with BCC.
2. BDAC need to continue analysing the range and nature of complaints and develop a policy to recommend to BCC and then operate. More people are also required to action complaints as it is predominantly HB, YB, DR, KMS handling.
3. HB is getting help with lettings etc at directly managed sites (Dave Hubball - Kingstanding; Cheryl Butler- Hunton Hill; Tony Webb – Matthew Boulton) and has identified that some of the directly managed sites require investment to fix issues.
   Action: HB to list and refer to Exec next meeting
4. HB reported that although BCC is sending out eviction letters as appropriate that some of the advice receive by Association secretaries is inconsistent.
   Action: MOSA is developing procedures and templates – Plot Management manual, Complaints etc to clarify.
5. Complaints: The planned meeting last month to specifically review complaints and processes was cancelled due to diary difficulties. Complaints cover four main areas and also need to consider recruiting more Advisors and looking at training requirements
   Action: HB to invite all Exec to the next team meeting on this subject and to run with whoever is available at that time.

Treasurer's Report (YB)

1. YB circulated a part analysis of the current account and initial research on alternative interest-bearing accounts. Request for accounts to be presented in easier to understand format.
2. A box of books and paperwork has been received from the previous treasurer via our legal representative. YB and DR are continuing researching the spending.
3. YB confirmed that BDAC has paid the full amount to our insurers (84% increase on previous yar) but although the final instalment has been approved by BCC it is still awaited.
4. YB confirmed in month expense to cover software purchase and web site fees.
5. The show account with £6000 in it is still frozen.

Working Group Reports

Action: Working group team leaders – KM again asked for any written reports to be emailed to the Exec before the meeting so the meeting can be shorter.

Note: Some Exec members left as they were unable to remain for an extended time.

Finance:
YB and DR are continuing a review of the books and information received from our previous treasurer. DR confirmed that the last 7 years' ledger entries have been input to a spreadsheet. From the box handed over by David Rawlings, there were only 14 receipts included (for the last 43 years). Initial impressions indicate that there have been arithmetical errors; very few descriptive details of transactions and the amounts given to our General Meetings have been understated but that the overall view is that there is no evidence of improper practice. However, the Exec was advised to expect an adjustment of £995 at the AGM to reconcile the figures correctly (adjustment figure for the past 7 years).
A phone has been bought for BDAC – cost £6 a month.
Action: Working Group to continue researching interest bearing account returns and to recommend switching some or all accounts/funds to Lloyds Bank which is their preferred choice after investigation of alternative banks because of all the problems we've had with Santander. Last month we received £9.61 on a balance of over £10,800.

Communications
Report attached as below.
Software that Clive suggested would be useful has now been bought. Also mobile phone – which has the same number as what is on the website.
Action: All Exec to send any entries for the next Site bulletin newsletter to Clive before 16th Sept.

Infrastructure - Flo Pickering
Anthony Downes (City Architects) has been in contact and said that there is enough money to do all the proposed work on the 14 sites. BCC has completed all drawings for the work needed on sites. We are awaiting copies with costings- expected next week - to approve before the work begins. BCC has requested that BDAC/BCC agree a wider definition of the work allowed. The meeting has some disagreement on this as some BCC work has been sub standard. KY reminder the Exec of the work priorities stated in the current Agreement and that the BCC sponsored Site surveys and asbestos reports identified over £2 million of spend over two years ago.
Action : Working Group to identify how BCC wants to change the definition or priorities of approved spend for the Exec to consider.

Shows and Events
1. The Working Group is making contact with the Birmingham Open Spaces Forum
2. 5 Competitions (best plot etc) which haven't been run recently – information and entry forms already on website. Agreed to take these off website and review as part of discussions around the purpose and value of shows and events. We can take on board comments invited via the website.
3. Current Exec members on this Working Group are Kerry, Cheryl, Clive. Hester and David also wish to be involved in looking at bigger picture (before anything specific planned for 2025)

Action: KY to send them an additional idea – a token lottery prize aimed at plot regeneration.

Governance

In relation to a point about ponds at Thornbridge being netted and therefore safe, it was stressed that the absence of a pond sign could invalidate the insurance so plotholders needed to be told to put them up.
KY confirmed that although no meeting was held this month that work is continuing.

Management Of Sites and Associations (MOSA)

1. A report drafting a Cultivation Manual was circulated earlier this week but has had no responses so far. There were no immediate questions.
   Action: All exec to review and send comments as required so that it can be voted on next meeting as a policy document.

The meeting then reviewed a presentation by K M-S of the process of researching a complaint: this one example is a serious example of what could be happening elsewhere too. The original complaint stemmed from a local neighbour complaining about noise of cockerel(s). The visit identified that there is systematic and widespread breeches of the BCC Management Handbook and rules of significance. This included unsanitary wildfowl keeping, probable cock fighting at night, new born kittens being kept, many chicken coops, substantial over-sized buildings, cages and locked fences on plots. It appeared that few of the 110 allotments were actually being used for cultivation and other normal allotment activities.
As the Working Group was concerned about wild fowl health they have already notified the Police and RSPCA. The police said it was not their issue. Council officers are dealing. The complainant stated that a window had been broken after raising a complaint previously.
Action: Following discussion DR to draft an email to be sent by our Exec officers to BCC regarding breach of tenancy agreements and include all of the pictures as evidence.

Due to the time all other items were deferred.
The meeting voiced appreciation to DR for attending and wish him a speedy recovery.

The meeting ended at 17.34.

Interim Chair's Report to BDAC Executive Meeting Saturday 14th September

At the AGM around 18 months ago the past Chair, treasurer and some of the longer serving members of the executive retired after many years of service and stated that the future would include a lot of change. We are still very much in the process of change now.

The new executive included a lot of new people with new ideas, skills and the energy to make things happen. A key change has been to become incorporated as this gives the new body a legal identity and replaces the 'joint and several' responsibilities of our members. The new exec took advice from the National Allotments association who identified the alternative legal structures and we decided a Co-operative identity is best suited to our future needs They also recommended that we achieve our goals in stages. We put these recommendations to the AGM 18 months ago and they approved our becoming a cooperative and to redefine our membership moving from 7000 individual plot holders to being the 113 allotment associations which use Birmingham City land.

Regarding our application to become a legal cooperative we are still awaiting confirmation from the government department. We thought it would take six weeks but it's more like six months so far.

So it is important to appreciate the work we do now has two drivers – firstly the 'business as usual' such as managing some allotments, ensuring the councils rules are observed, being the main communications link between the Council and our members and plot holders and running events. The second driver is our move to become a cooperative. This will change many things for the Executive, mainly due to implementing statutory regulations like audits and tax returns, but it also means we can proceed with our goal for the Council to give control of all aspects of managing the allotments including rent setting and collection with the Council only retaining statutory duties as the landlord. We have approached the Council and they have informally approved our direction and this liaison is ongoing. We have not got down to discussing any specific responsibilities yet. We will initiate this following the government confirming our legal status. Then it will depend on what the Council is willing to handover to us and what they need to retain.

So the works we are all doing now is mainly for Business As Usual and preparing for us managing more than in the past. We have set up several workgroups to look at both current and new working. There has been a lot to do and it is worth noting that work has already made significant progress in the areas of:

- Training. After an absence of any training by the council we have run 6 courses. More subjects are planned and will become regular features
- Our Comms team now know how many sites there actually are and the main contacts. Our website content is under review.
- Our work with the Flo Pickering Fund has identified the respective infrastructure priorities and this whole process needs to be reviewed in the future
- We are working though our management tools within the governance group in preparation such as reviewing our key stakeholders and communications channels and changing our own constitution again to meet the new statutory requirements. This is turn leads into the work of how to assist our association members to manage their sites.
- It was very disappointing to have to cancel this years Annual Show, but I've since heard that commercial farmers are making significant losses with low harvests because of the bad spring weather. If the commercial guys can't do it then I'm not too down-heartened especially as it is time to see if we have the resources to relaunch all five competitions from the past. We need to assess the needs of each and identify what we can do.
  Much has been said of the lack of interest and involvement from our members and plot holders generally. I was one of them. I've had an allotment for over six years but didn't even hear of the BDAC for the first four years. I believe that we need to become important to them and we will be able to measure our success by their involvement in our events, responses to our website and other communications. And the competitions are an important method to get their involvement. Next year's annual show and other competitions must happen if we have the resources available.
- I also want to launch another way for us to gain attention of our members - to hold a lucky-dip aimed at plot regeneration at our half yearly meeting in November. More details when we come to events on the agenda.

I and David also want to say ‘thank you’ to everyone on this executive for the work you have done so far and continue to do.

Keith
Interim Chair

Communications Working Group Report to 14th September 2024 Executive from CF

Web:

- Updating contact details for sites
- Contact details for BDAC updated to include registered address and phone number
- Competition page updated
- Multi-language: suggestion that the site is made available in other languages similar to BCC has been investigated and trialled on a private development site. Unfortunately the most common website translation software was found to have a security flaw. Currently trialling the free version of Google translate available to non-profit organisations with a view to going live at the end of this month/start October.
- WP Forms Plugin purchased and installed: There have been approximately 40 uses of the forms in the last 30 days. The plugin now sends 2 automatic replies. Flow chart of how it works circulated
- Latest Version of WordPress installed and activated
- Security report checked. - Good
- Weekly Traffic Report: Traffic summary for September 02 - September 09, 2024 Human: 769 Bots 133
- Continue migration of data to our business account

Facebook:

585 Members

Monthly Roundup:

After an absence of two months work has begun on the September Issue

Development List for Working Group:

- Policy Hub - add plugin to count downloads
- Speed optimisation
- Improved search
- Improve analytics
- Optimise web storage which has now reached 80% of our allocation
- Investigate further the implications of the change to our Gmail service which delivers all our web-based mail from forms.
- Check communications strategy against stakeholders list when accepted.
- Future of Royal Town of Sutton Coldfield Council sites? To discuss at Exec level
- Business account access