



Founded 1994

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1st July 2015

Cllr. Matthew Bayliss
Chairman - Open Spaces Committee
Alton Town Council
Town Hall
Market Square
Alton
GU34 1HD

Dear Cllr. Bayliss

Topics of concern to the Alton Allotment Association (AAA) - informal discussion - Hawthorn Allotment site - 7:30pm, Wednesday 1st July 2015

During my short time as Chairman of the Alton Allotment Association, I have been made aware of a variety of issues, by numerous members and past Officers.

Among the points raised are the following:-

- Grass & hedge cutting maintenance arrangements;
- Harmonisation of dates and collection of plot rents and association membership;
- Sharing of information (names & addresses of plot holders & association members);
- Security of sites;
- General maintenance & improvements;
- Future Maintenance and Improvements Budgets.

Maintenance arrangements

In past years, up to and including 2013, the Council and the Association had an arrangement, where the routine grass and hedge cutting, was carried out by nominated volunteer plot holders.

They would submit a form detailing the work carried out to the Association who would then invoice the Council. The rates agreed between the Association and the Council were:-

<u>Borovere</u>	<u>Rate in 2013</u>	<u>Proposed rate for 2015*</u>
Grass cutting	£37.30 per cut	£38.77
Cut the Hermitage Close hedge	£56.00 per cut	£58.20
<u>Whitedown</u>		
Grass cutting	£37.30 per cut	£38.77
Cut the 188m and the 35m hedges	£130.00 per cut	£135.11
<u>Wooteys / Spitalfields</u>		
Grass cutting	£37.30 per cut	£38.77
Cut the 133m hedge	£130.00 per cut	£135.11
<u>Hawthorn</u>		
Grass cutting	£58.13 per cut	£69.41
<u>Equipment replacement</u>		
	£500	£519.66
<u>Vacant plots</u>		
Strim 3 times per year (Council to provide list on each occasion)	£10.00 per cut	£10.40

Hedge Cutting Access

Areas of hedge blocked by ploholders' shed and/or equipment are excluded, though it should be noted that so far we have been able to reach almost all the hedging and we will aim to do at least as well in future.

** Note - With inflation linked to the Consumer Price Index (CPI), based on the Office for National Statistics September figures for 2013 (2.7%) & 2014 (1.2%). The increase in the cost of renting plot WH53 went up from £21 in 2014 to £23 in 2015, an increase of 9.52%*

Harmonisation of dates and collection of rents/membership

At present, the Town Council collects plot rents, which must be paid by the end of February each year. (I received a letter dated 20th December 2013, advising me that my rent for 2014 had to be paid by 31st January 2014).

Association membership runs from March to February, and I understand that the Town Council had already agreed to collect this on our behalf. All membership subscriptions and contact details were then passed on to the Association.

I propose that we assume that any resident who rents an allotment from the Council, is automatically a member of the Association, UNLESS they choose to opt out. All future application forms to make this clear. Anyone applying would be informed that details presented on the form would also be made available to the Association, unless they state that they do not wish to. We should then also harmonise the due dates and continue with the Council collecting both rents and subscription.

Sharing of information

It follows on from the above that, subject to Data Protection legislation compliance, it would be of mutual benefit to share contact details of plot holders.

Security of sites

There have been thefts of equipment from sites in past years, culminating in the break-in at the Wooteys site in 2104. This resulted in the loss of essential power-driven equipment from the Associations' shed, and the subsequent relocation of remaining equipment to the care of Alton Town Council. It may also have contributed to the interruption of the maintenance arrangement between our organisations?

The Association acknowledges the attempts made to repair the fence, and the additional of old iron railings to that point in the perimeter fence, where the thieves made their entrance and getaway. We understand that a Right of Way (Footpath 26C) exists, which leads to the point where the break-in took place, and that a vehicle had been driven along this leafy, secluded footpath, enabling the removal of our heavy tools. Would the Council enter into discussions with the Highway Authority, Hampshire County Council, with a view to them providing bollards or other anti-vehicle measures at the junction of this path and Edward Road?

The Association, in generous co-operation with members of the Councils' ground staff, have replaced the Associations' wooden shed, with a metal sea container, which will be locked with a high security padlock. While this should safeguard our assets, we are conscious of the vulnerability of equipment stored in individual members sheds, and the site in general. We would therefore request that the Town Council consider taking further measures to improve site security.

General maintenance & improvements

The Association is grateful for the general maintenance that has been carried out over the last Winter, i.e. the cutting back of the hedge at Whitedown. However, it would appear that other general maintenance work might be building up, such as the replacement of the old notice boards, the repair (possible replacement) of the large double gates at Wooteys, and the overhanging trees in the boundary hedge at Whitedown, which we feel needs action. We are confident that if we were to survey our members, or perform a detailed examination of the various sites, other work could easily be identified.

We are also aware that there has been consultation about the problems faced by those allotment holders, who have plots at Hawthorn, with car parking. The site has been in use for approximately 5-6 years, and the issue around parking inside the fence remains.

Similarly, discussion has taken place about the provision of extra taps at the Wooteys site. While quotes have been received by the Council for the necessary remedial work, including laying underground pipes, some plot holders are still struggling with a lack of water.

Future maintenance and Improvements Budgets

The Association understands that, in principle, the Councils' Open Spaces Committee sets budgets each Autumn for consideration by Full Council. These budgets determine the level of spending on maintenance and general improvements of all the assets under the authority of the Committee.

In the interests of transparency, accountability and co-operation, we would like to know what the previous Maintenance & Improvements budgets have been for the Borovere, Hawthorn, Spitalfields / Wooteys and Whitedown allotment sites over the past 4 years.

Alton Allotment Association members represent a range of ages, male and female, working full / part time, single, married with or without children, or retired. All have pressures on their time.

Whilst we can appeal for volunteers to assist the Town Council with the routine grass cutting and hedge cutting, we may only be able to attract recruits if there is sufficient inducement. Up until very recently there had been an established, acceptable working arrangement where our volunteers performed these tasks, and submitted a form detailing the work to the Association Treasurer, who then sent an invoice to the Council. Once paid, the Association would remunerate the volunteers. This system ensured that, like the plots themselves, which the Council expects to be maintained to an appropriate standard, the paths and hedges were

kept in a good condition to the satisfaction of the Council and plot holders.

It must also be recognised that the Council has a duty to maintain a number of Open Spaces, which it does with its team of dedicated ground staff. However the cost of providing this service must be taken into consideration. By entering into an agreement, similar to that which has operated before, we believe that Alton Town Council can discharge its obligation to those who rent allotments, at a significantly reduced financial burden.

On the issue of future maintenance & improvements, we would also request that Alton Town Council considers setting appropriate levels of funding within their budgets for 2016 and subsequent years.

Between 2014 and 2015 allotment rents rose by 9.52%, well above the CPI figure of 1.2% in September 2014; was this level of increase applied equally to all recreation and leisure facilities operated by Alton Town Council? Did the Council increase its maintenance and improvements budget by a comparable amount?

The population of Alton is increasing. While the current allotment waiting list is only 31, with new houses having relatively smaller gardens, we feel sure that demand for allotments will also increase. A range of plot sizes and raised beds for those with mobility issues, could be offered. Has the Town Council given consideration to acquiring more land for allotments? If not, might we suggest that other potential sites are identified in those parts of the town, which are not well served by the present sites. Perhaps near Windmill Hill, Chawton Park or even on the mixed use site at the old Molson Coors site. Planning for such contingencies should begin as soon as possible.

Conclusion

We welcome the opportunity to develop this important partnership between Alton Town Council and our Association, which represents the users of the Councils' sole statutory recreational facility.

By entering into a service level agreement on the routine grass & hedge cutting, we believe this will demonstrate the Councils commitment to our new partnership.

Alton Town Council should set future budgets, which reflect the likely increase in demand.

In addition, may we suggest that we hold regular meetings each year between officers and elected members of the Council, and officers of the Association, to discuss any matters of concern.

Yours sincerely

John Pritchard
Chairman
Alton Allotment Association

Cc - Mrs Pat Harris, Interim Town Clerk, Alton Town Council