

Frodsham Town Allotment Association

Meeting with Frodsham Town Council at Castle Park, Thursday December 12th

From the Council:

Linda Brown, Mark Warren and Fran Sutton

From the Association:

Ashton Drive

Geoff Woollard
Idris Roberts

London Road

Graham Duncalf
Mick Ellams
Brian Twiss
Ken Crouch
Chris and Jane Moore
Barrie Howarth

Kingsway

Dave Thomas
Peter Vickery
Cara Balshaw
Steve McEntee

Linda outline the purpose of the meeting which was for the Council to find out whether the plot holders are happy with the way the allotments are being run and to explore alternative arrangements for managing the allotments. Linda acknowledged that the Council were finding their way on this issue, but gave the example of a model along the lines of that being used by CWAC. This is to charge plot holders a peppercorn rent and then allow the plot holders to manage the sites themselves.

Asked what was behind the proposal, Linda said it derived from the Government's localism initiative and aimed to put more control into the hands of Community groups.

Immediate responses covered the size of the annual charge and the issue of liabilities concerning the boundaries between the plots and others, notably CWAC, the Town Council, Business Premises and Householders. Public liability insurance was also mentioned.

Mark stated that the Council has no axe to grind. He emphasised his personal support for allotments, but noted that not all Council members might be of the same view. Plot holders are at liberty to choose between leaving things as they are and moving to some level of devolved management. He made a careful distinction between infrastructure and management. There was no intention to

shoulder any infrastructure costs onto plot holders. However, issues such as the management of waiting lists and the size of allotments were examples of issues that plot holders might wish to take on themselves.

The issue of representation from plot holders at Council meetings was discussed. This had been proposed by London Road plot holders in the past but had not happened.

As the new Chair of the relevant committee, Linda said this seemed a good idea. It was explained that the three sites had now formed an association, the Frodsham Town Allotments Association, and it was agreed that a representative from the Association would be either be invited to Council Meetings when allotments were an agenda item or would request attendance when the Association wished to raise a specific issue. Peter Vickery would be the point of contact for communications between the Council and the Association. The Association was affiliated via the West Cheshire Allotment Federation to the National Allotment Society and would be able to call upon their help and advice.

The differences between the sites were discussed. Only Ashton Drive had running water. Mark noted that there were some concerns with water supplies, given that they were metered and that taps left running could prove expensive. It was pointed out that tap designs were available to overcome this problem. The costs of installing water supplies were clearly an issue as would be such costs as new fencing. The opportunities for grant support presented by some devolution from the Council to the Association were highlighted.

The question of how much the Council spent each year on maintenance was raised. Mark did not have the precise figure to hand, but estimated the income at around £400 with about the same sum being spent; in other words about break-even. (Note the plot holders discussed the actual income after the meeting. Assuming there are 27 plots in total and each plot holder pays £25 per annum, then the income works out at £675. Precise numbers should be explored at the next meeting).

The manner in which fees had been increased in the past was also discussed. Although the rentals were relatively small compared to some commercial plots, it was suggested that increases had not always been implemented in accordance with relevant legislation.

As to whether some level of devolution of responsibilities from the Council to the plot holders was desired, some of those present declared themselves happy to leave things as they are. This again would be discussed at future sessions.

The issue of the London Road landslip was an obvious barrier to any early devolution at that location and Mark reported that a meeting had just taken place between the Council and the Landowners. The outcome would be reported via the Town Council.

A concern raised by plot holders regarding any devolution centred on the grey areas between infrastructure and maintenance. There were overhanging trees and hedges along the boundaries of all the sites and it would be unrealistic, given

the height and nature of some of these, to expect plot holders to undertake the maintenance work themselves. Some of the overhang came from trees on neighbouring properties and some plots were losing sunlight. There was also a security issue at Kingsway concerning the hedge between Churchfields Play Area and the site following some pretty aggressive hedging work carried by CWAC on behalf of the Town Council.

Reflecting on these concerns, Fran proposed that the Council team would visit each site in turn to allow all site-specific issues to be clarified and this was agreed. Following recent changes in Council arrangements, the Town Council Groundsman would also have time to consider what needed to be done.

Given the size of the town and the relatively small number of plots available, it was asked whether the possibility of new sites being made available was a possibility. Mark replied that although the Council was certainly in favour of this, the scarcity of land available and its cost were considerable barriers. He distinguished between Allotments (with a capital A) and private gardens such as the Townfield Road allotments. More of the latter might become available.

The issue of plot holders who were temporarily unable to maintain their plots due to illness was raised. A solution might be to allow someone on a waiting list to take on the plot temporarily. Mark again saw this as an issue that might be best addressed by devolution of site management to plot holders.

The meeting agreed on the following way forward on a timeframe to be agreed:

1. Visits by Council representatives to each site in turn to record specific issues regarding maintenance and future investment
2. A follow-up meeting to this one to which the West Cheshire Federation would also be invited.

Linda thanked their attendees for their contributions and the meeting closed

Footnote:

There was a discussion following the meeting after the Council attendees had left. A point arose that might be worth considering. If arrangements stay as they are at the moment, then any income surplus from the rent paid by the plot holders to the council could be secured or carried over to the following year. Attendees questioned where the rental income is currently being spent; there has not been much evidence of it over the last few years. Part may go to the Groundsman and Public Liability Insurance. However these costs will be shared with the other amenities, i.e. playing fields, graveyards etc. It will be interesting to find out a breakdown for future reference.