Haslemere Allotments Association 8th AGM

7pm, 7 April 2022, Online via Zoom

Minutes

Attendees

Committee: Johan Ditmar (Chair), Orla Kelly (Vice-Chair), Colin Hewson (Secretary), Ann Tierney (Treasurer), Ian Hayes, Stuart Alexander, Caro Sanders, Val Austin

Gillian Brown, Catherine Charron, Charles Day, Kay Dudman, David Goodship, Judith Govey, Vartoug Gulbenkian, Len Harding, Harold Henry, Terence Quirke, Mike Reeves, Vinka Reeves, Irena Sawyer, Thom Stanbury, Letizia Tiley, Rachel Walkowiak, Celia Woolfrey.

Apologies: Sean Lewis

Introduction

The chair welcomed attendees and introduced the committee. Rachel Walkowiak had stepped down since the last AGM and Stuart Alexander and Val Austin had been co-opted on to the committee. Johan had been on the committee for four years, while Orla was the longest standing member.

Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the last meeting were approved.

Chair's report

In the last year the number of plots had increased by one – a full plot had been given up and had been split into two. We had welcomed 14 new tenants, more new plot holders than usual, a lot of new plot holders had struggled, maybe underestimating the amount of work involved, and had given up. In fact two plots had been re-let three times in just the one year, which was quite unusual, and as a result the committee had decided to implement the Gardening Club. The table showed the Covid effect on the waiting list – in April 2020 we received lots of new applicants, so the list grew from 26 to 70, and is now at 82. The person currently at the top of the waiting list applied in April 2020, so would have waited about two years, anyone applying now is more likely facing a wait of five years or more.

<u>Site maintenance</u>

Johan thanked the team – John McArthur, who mows the paths, and Steve Embleton, who recently volunteered to join the team, taking responsibility for water. Highlights of the year were the two skips, the removal of the old community shed on 61B, three large trees being removed, and the organising of the chipping day, which was very popular – held for the second time, and we will definitely keep it going. Pathways paid £576 in total towards tree surgery.

Ian reported that we had two new trolleys, they take quite a long time to assemble and break a lot, and he reminded plot holders not to overload them. They probably last two years.

Water: this was a topic at last year's AGM. We had had quite a lot of problems with low pressure, or lack of water, with hot summers, and it was worse on some plots depending where they are sited. The committee tried out float valves but found they were quite unreliable, with ongoing problems and wasting of water. Now the plan is to join two tanks together, next to each other, to provide more capacity. This work has started with double tanks by plot 58 and will be ongoing – if anyone has spare tanks, similar to the type and dimensions that we already have, please let the committee know.

Storm Eunice in mid-February caused quite a lot of damage across the site, to fences, greenhouses (including the communal greenhouse roof) and sheds. The committee arranged a skip to dispose of damaged items, work has been carried out to the communal greenhouse, and Nick repaired the notice board near the Midhurst Road gate, which should now last a long time.

Damage was caused to the main path by a vehicle, being used to drop off materials, which got stuck. The RAC van which came to rescue it also got stuck and had to be rescued. This caused a lot of damage to a neighbouring plot, which was repaired but more needs to be done, on a future communal workday – the state of the path also makes mowing the communal path more difficult. After the incident, the committee temporarily closed the site to vehicles, to avoid other vehicles getting stuck, and giving the ground time to heal.

Events

The annual plant sale went well, for which thanks to Vinka Reeves and other volunteers, who put a lot of effort into it. It was nice to see the communal greenhouse in use for what it was planned, after Covid. The event raised £800, double that of previous years. We are looking to organise another, probably on Saturday 14 May, so if you are growing seedlings, maybe plant a few more that can be sold or swopped at the sale.

Coffee morning: this was really popular, and lots of cakes sold, and raised £850 and it is hoped it will take place again this year.

Communal plots

Caro Sanders reported that despite Covid, we kept the communal workdays going. They take place on the first Saturday of the month, from 10 to 12 and everyone is very welcome – with Gillian Brown kindly providing tea and biscuits.

The communal greenhouse is in use in the way we had hoped, with various plot holders using it to raise seedlings, and we hope to use it when we hold the barbecue in the summer. We got rid of the dilapidated shed on 61B and are building a new shed near the Composting Toilet, which is now in use – anyone who wants to use it should get in touch, and will be put on a rota for it, the latest rota has just been sent out. We have built an insect house, and some dry hedging at 61B. We have added seven new try-out beds for people near the top of the waiting list, where potential plot holders can see how they will cope, with a small plot. These are called the Gardening Club plots, and are like a probationary period, lasting up to a year. When they get to the top of the waiting list, GC plot holders move to a full plot. The system has been working well, with people very positive about it, a chance to get to know other GC plot holders and those at one end now have a WhatsApp group.

Coming up: we plan to have a new small tool shed on 61B for those Gardening Club members. We also want to have a bigger shed near the communal greenhouse, for teas and coffees and cake and some gardening books, to make it more of a community area. The aim is to have water butts attached to all communal sheds.

The committee is also keen to get suggestions for the communal plots, and for workdays.

Treasurer's Report

Ann Tierney said there was not much to add to the accounts. There was a balance of over £12,000 at the end of the year, and we are expecting £4000 from Pathways, so there is plenty of cash for any new projects. The income is fairly steady; we didn't raise as much external funding this year, but we can look at that again. The sinking fund stands at £7218, and there were no expenses against that, and £2500 should come in, in contributions.

There were no questions, and the Treasurer's report was unanimously approved.

Proposal to restrict motor vehicle access.

Johan reported that the committee had discussed how to prevent something happening again, after the car got stuck. The plot holder had wanted to drop off soil, but there was no reason to use a car for that when they could use a wheelbarrow.

The motion was that plot holders should require permission before bringing a vehicle on site. It was not an outright ban, but there were conditions. It must be the right conditions – for example in a wet January the response to a request would likely be no. The aim is to protect the main grass path, which is a lovely feature, and avoid ruts and compacting, and damage to adjoining plots.

Vinka Reeves wondered if we should specify purposes for which vehicles can be brought in, sometimes they were used to avoid parking restrictions, whereas it should only be when they were essential, for bringing in heavy goods. Johan agreed, it should be for cases where there was no viable alternative, soil was a clear case where it was not appropriate, it was harder to say when it was appropriate. Johan pointed out that the guidelines already said that vehicles should not be left more than 30 minutes.

Irena Sawyer said she had a new greenhouse being delivered next week, after her previous one was destroyed in the storm, it was heavy and bulky and asked about permission to bring on a vehicle.

Gillian Brown said that when giving permission, consideration should be given to the width of the vehicle – her plot had been driven over by vehicles.

Rachel Walkowiak said she disagreed. The main path was meant for vehicular access, and the problem would have been avoided if the driver had used the one way system, and asked how we would police it if the motion was agreed? Johan said we rely on people to follow the rules, and even before January there had been cases where wide vehicles had damaged plots bordering the path.

Thom Stanbury said it was hard to see what we were voting on and how to decide what was acceptable, and he agreed with Rachel.

David Goodship said the path was designed to be driven on, and it was a shame it had to be so draconian. It shouldn't have been driven on in those weather conditions. There was nothing to stop people ignoring it.

Vartoug Gulbenkian said the worst damage had been to her plot. She was really impressed we can talk about it and say no cars. There should be a bit of leeway, the takeaway was that it was not just yes or no.

Caro re-emphasised that it was not a proposal to ban cars altogether, but a restriction. She took issue with the suggestion that the path was principally for driving on, in her view it was for safe walking and cycling.

Caro also said that community days were not just for setting up sheds etc, we do communal things – for example if someone is struggling, we could take on the moving of heavy stuff on to their plot as part of the communal day, there are ways to get round using vehicles.

Stuart Alexander agreed with Caro and said that his experience is that codified systems don't work.

Stuart said that usually the time when serious clearing of plots was needed, was when people took them over initially and this work could be made part of the communal days.

Ann Tierney said she had used a vehicle twice in 22 years.

Ian Hayes, who has been responsible for maintenance, said that use of vehicles anytime, regardless of the weather, was not consequence-free, for example John McArthur has said mowing has become more difficult. Any initiative which will reduce maintenance work will be welcomed.

Vote: 18 for, 2 against, 5 abstained.

Action: the committee will consider how this should be worded in the guidelines and update them.

Elections of officers and committee members

Johan said that fortunately lots of people are happy to stand again, but unfortunately Ann and Ian are standing down. Ann had been treasurer since 2018 and written the newsletter, and had done a great job; while Ian's work had been crucial to maintaining the water and trolleys. Thanks to Ann, Ian and Rachel for their invaluable contribution. Stuart has agreed to take on the role of Treasurer. As well as Stuart and Val, a new member, Helen Edgar, has volunteered to join the committee.

Matters raised by plot holders

David Goodship had two queries. He asked what could be done to protect against theft, citing a couple who felt they had been targeted, with special items taken, yet power tools having been left, after a window had been smashed. Could the wildlife cameras which had been used for surveillance be used? Johan said that would only work if it happened often and this case had not been reported to the committee, which was the first thing which should be done if there was theft. There was probably not much to be done if it was just one incident, and the shed had been locked. Two years ago there had been lots of security issues, and the Haslemere gate had been replaced, and fence repairs made, and five people had been caught and cautioned.

The second query was on water: there had been crazy changes with the weather, with times towards the end of the winter when the water had run out of water butts. David asked if we are tied to a particular licence on water?

Johan said the guidelines were water should be on from 1 May to 1 September but there was flexibility – last year it was turned on, on 1 April, and then turned off on 13 November; this year it had been turned on, on 28 March. However it wasn't just a matter of turning on and off the water, it was a big job with a need to drain the water etc. But we do have flexibility.

Johan said that Don Baker had emailed to comment on the vehicle motion, asking about access for ambulances, and potentially upgrading the main path for that. Orla said that committee member Sean Lewis, who worked for the emergency services, said that an ambulance wouldn't consider driving on to the allotments, an unknown, unregulated road, but instead would bring in a stretcher. Johan added that ambulances weigh about 4 tons and are wider than the path and would probably just get stuck, and they would anyway need a stretcher to reach the plots away from the main path. Northfields allotments don't even have a main path like ours.

Vinka Reeves said there were so many uneven paths, and she thought we needed to seriously talk to plot holders to keep paths level and of a certain width. As individual plot holders we are liable if anyone falls. It's not just ambulances, it could be visitors, and kids – people don't realise they are liable. Johan also pointed to plot holders who have glass greenhouses by the edge of the plot. Vinka said this should be a high priority, and Judith agreed with Vinka – both sides of her plot are really uneven, and always have been. The paths should be looked at, especially where some have encroached. Thom agreed.

Irena Sawyer asked if anyone had thought of changing the lock system to one where you open it with a key and it automatically shuts behind you. Ian said they were going to try and replace the Midhurst gate with a new version of the same lock, but needed to find a welder for the work. Ian pointed to the logistics of changing the lock, of getting new keys to everyone…and Orla said at the Midhurst end there was the added issue that there had to be access for the electricity people. Johan said new locks would increase security, there were so many keys in existence, including some with ex plot holders. But it would cost a lot - £5 a key, with 130 keys required.

Vinka said that if you used a longer key it was easier, and she could lend hers for getting ones cut.

Charles Day said that the fences for the houses by the Haslemere entrance, backing on to 1B and 2B seemed to have crept, with new posts 6 inches to a foot into the path. Johan said he needed to have a look at that. Charles said that the committee did a very good job managing plots, but how much do Pathways keep them up to date with the number of plot holders etc – on a six month or yearly basis? Colin said that the problem of Pathways chasing for money, was that we had no control. Johan said we have calls re payments with Pathways but people are sometimes only asked to pay four months after the money is due. We don't think we have missed out with someone leaving without paying.

End of meeting

The meeting concluded at 8.15pm