

Minutes of Meeting - Borough of Richmond Allotment Group (BRAG) with London Borough of Richmond upon Thames (LBRuT)

Date: 23rd February 2016, 10:00am

Venue: Civic Centre, Twickenham

Present:

David Allister (DA) - LBRuT

Howard Fletcher (HF) - BRAG (Minutes)

Phil Iddison (PI) - BRAG

Pete Lewis (PL) - LBRuT

Chris Morley Smith (CMS) - BRAG

Richard Ward (RW) - BRAG

1. Introductions

CMS said that BRAG had called the meeting to discuss the items on the agenda previously issued, and that it was intended that the meeting be constructive and mutually beneficial.

DA said that he, too, wished for this to be a constructive meeting as he had felt in the past that BRAG had not engaged with the council. He said that he had not invited to meetings - he did not consider "welcome to attend" to be an invitation as he would usually be invited to contribute with a slot on the agenda.

It was agreed to go forward in a positive manner and to build the relationship through regular (ideally twice-yearly) meetings.

2. Constitution and Recognition of BRAG

DA had commented on a draft of the BRAG constitution, but said he had not seen the final version (now re-sent). For LBRuT to recognise a body, it must have a formal constitution and be representative of its members.

The BRAG constitution says that site representatives must collect and agree the priorities of their tenants. DA said that when issues arise, opinion of all tenants should be canvassed by email and by posting notices on notice boards to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to contribute. This representation is useful to LBRuT, but the tenants' contract remains with LBRuT and therefore direct contact cannot be refused.

All but two sites (Queens Road and South Close) have a nominated BRAG representative. Most attend the regular quarterly meetings, but even those not active all receive notices, meeting agendas and minutes. BRAG therefore represents approximately 1,900 of the 2,000 (95%) plot-holders. HF asked PL to provide contacts for the two remaining sites.

3. Allotment Strategy

The LBRuT 2010-2015 Allotment Strategy has now expired. CMS said that, as previously expressed, BRAG is keen to assist with the development of the next one.

DA said that the existing strategy is still being followed until it is replaced. There has been no progress on this pending revision of the LBRuT structure resulting from its merger with Wandsworth. All senior management posts (Chief Executive, Directors and Assistant Directors) will be combined from September 2016. Below that, the two boroughs will have separate structures although these may be revised, for example the current LBRuT Heads of Parks, Arts and Sport will be combined into one Head of Culture position. Other savings will be sought over time by sharing accommodation, processes (e.g. billing) and asset management.

The existing Allotment Strategy sought to bring LBRuT allotments to a cost-neutral position by 2015. This was nearly achieved, with a current shortfall of just £13k. DA said that since it is not intended (nor permitted) to make a profit from allotments, it would be reasonable to anticipate future rent rises to be only a little above inflation. However, government grants are being considerably reduced in future and there will be continued pressure to cut costs and/or increase income.

4. Devolvement

BRAG representatives have noted that the pressure being felt in previous years to embrace devolved or semi-devolved arrangements with LBRuT has been lifted. DA said that he does not recognise semi-devolved status as each site has differing arrangements and these are not formally documented in agreements. CMS offered to send DA a copy of the signed agreement for Short Lots.

DA said that devolvement is a matter to be explored in the next strategy as he believes it would benefit both LBRuT and tenants. There are several organisational options, including a 'federation' as is in place at Kingston. Site committees would act as agents for LBRuT and would need to report, say, quarterly and be monitored accordingly.

5. Terms & Conditions

PI said that the current Terms & Conditions are poorly structured and that he would be willing to work with other BRAG representatives to draft a revised document setting out more clearly respective obligations of the council and the tenant.

DA said that he accepted the current document is not perfect, and would welcome BRAG input to improve it, linked to the next strategy paper. PL said that the current document was developed from the previous 'Garden Rules', and is mainly used as a backstop in disputes.

DA said that if devolvement is progressed, he would need to see a consistent set of obligations for LBRuT and for site committees. LBRuT would still be ultimately liable, and would therefore need to provide training so that

committees could perform their duties appropriately, and monitor that they do so. PL would act with authority as the representative of LBRuT.

DA said that the imminent changes of personnel and roles could bring different points of view, so no work should be done on this until the forward position is clearer.

6. Additional Allotment Sites

RW said that BRAG had written to LBRuT suggesting potential new sites for allotment use, but had received no response. DA said that there is no obligation to provide a specific number or ratio of allotments, and that they fully meet their statutory requirements. Where new sites become available, other uses such as housing or children's play areas would take priority. There is no intention to increase or decrease allotment provision.

PI said that a further 7 acres of land could be made available by Royal Parks. DA said that costs to convert the land to allotment use would be prohibitive.

It has been known for many years that the Shacklegate Lane site will be closing and returned to cemetery use. All tenants have been given adequate notice and will not, as has been suggested, be given priority on future waiting lists. They have been advised to put their name on alternative site lists so that by the time Shacklegate Lane returns to cemetery land they will be at the top of the other waiting lists.

7. Waiting Lists

DA said that waiting list policy is written in the existing strategy. Potential tenants may apply for plots on three sites. When a plot is allocated, there is no obligation to remove entries on other lists. Some tenants have plots on several sites. Separate waiting lists are maintained for all 24 sites. Some are maintained by the site committees but should be copied to PL. CMS will copy the Short Lots list to PL.

PL has suggested closing lists where there is little prospect of availability within a reasonable time. DA has refused this as it would then leave no measure of demand.

Some of the applicants have been on lists for many years and are unlikely to be still at the same address, still wanting an allotment, or even still alive. In many instances of older entries, the information is incomplete, with some comprising just a name and telephone number. Currently the council can contact the first ten on a list before they find one that still wants a plot.

Full information is only available since procedures were revised in 2012. HF suggested attempting to contact all entries before that date, asking for a restatement of interest and for an email address. Although there would be a cost of this one-off exercise, it would reduce the list considerably and make future contact more reliable and cost effective, and allow vacant plots to be allocated more quickly.

DA agreed that the waiting list policy could be improved and should be reviewed in the next strategy development.

8. Survey of Service Levels

CMS presented the results of a survey conducted by BRAG showing the conditions and services at each site. This highlights considerable inconsistencies in what is provided by the site and LBRuT, most notably in areas of insurance, waste disposal, and site administration costs. DA said that he would prefer all sites to be the same, but the small amounts involved were not worth lengthy debate. Generally, matters evened out and he would not entertain increasing services to all sites simply because one was given something.

DA said that all sites are covered by LBRuT insurance for general allotment conditions. Individual sites may choose to take out extra insurance to cover non-LBRuT sponsored events such as open days, etc.

DA is of the opinion that waste disposal should not be provided by LBRuT. All items on an allotment should be compostable or burnable, or brought to site by the plot-holder in which case it can be removed similarly.

9. Site Maps

DA admitted that the LBRuT provision of site maps was in the existing strategy, but the GIS officer was no longer employed and no alternative had been sought. PL said that he had been attempting to produce maps using a graduate trainee, but this was proving difficult. DA said he would encourage the use of students and work experience staff to help. BRAG had suggested offering the task as a training exercise to local colleges, and CMS agreed to investigate further.

According to the allotment terms and conditions, tenants are required to display their plot number.

The contractor which installed the water systems did not provide 'as built' drawings as would be expected. The current contractor is aware of this. DA said that tenants should not be interfering with water systems even in the event of emergency. Emergency contact and call-out details should be posted on notice boards at each site in case of problems. PL will provide these.

10. Site Keys

BRAG had suggested increasing the deposit on site keys to increase the likelihood of return when a tenant leaves. DA said it would not be possible for a public service to demand high 'joining' fees, and this would increase instances of keys being copied or bought elsewhere. PL said keys are frequently returned and tenants reimbursed.

11. Bonfires

BRAG had responded to DA's request for consideration of a blanket bonfire ban, but had received no response. BRAG had suggested banning bonfires throughout July and August.

DA said that this had come about because of a vociferous complainer at one site although a few other complaints had been received. He is preparing a paper for discussion with Cllr Fleming, including DA's personal opinion that bonfires should only be permitted between October and March. It would, however, be possible to have local rules rather than one applying to all sites. There is no restriction on Richmond residents regarding domestic bonfires.

12. Website

HF asked whether the RBRuT website could reference BRAG, and possibly show links to individual site websites where these exist. As BRAG has no funds, would DA consider either contributing the costs of maintaining a BRAG website or asking the council to host one?

DA said that he would happily provide a link to a BRAG website, where links to other sites could be included. He suggested contacting Colin Cooper of SWELEN, who provides support for Richmond friends' groups in similar circumstances.

13. Conclusion

All agreed that the meeting had been useful. DA said that he wished to support BRAG, even to the extent of financial support where this could be demonstrated to be effective and of a general rather than site-specific nature.

CMS will arrange a further meeting in September, by which time personnel and role changes should be known.