

Questions and Answers (06/11/2010)

[Copies of this document were prepared in advance of the General Meeting to consider the proposal for Witney Allotment Association to take on the running of the Town Council owned allotments .]

1. Why are Councillors keen to let go of the allotments?

Mainly to reduce the cost to council tax payers. However, the move chimes with the trend to encourage community participation in the delivery of local services. There are many examples, nationally, of allotment tenants managing their own affairs – so it's nothing **new**.

2. How are things arranged in other places?

We have taken soundings from two allotments in Banbury who have run their own affairs under the terms of a lease for two and 25 years respectively. Both were enthusiastic about the merits of holding a lease from their local Council and arrangements have worked well. We have also been inspired by Cripsey Meadows Allotments in Oxford who have a very thriving community of allotment gardeners. (See: www.cripseymeadow.org.uk)

3. Whose idea is it to change the way allotments are run in Witney?

Witney Town Council (WTC) initiated discussions with Witney Allotment Association (**WAA**.) These have been conducted in a positive and amicable way and we think the proposed outcomes meet the interests of both parties.

4. Very simply - what's the deal?

The allotments at Lakeside, Hailey Road, and Newland will be let to WAA for a total peppercorn rent of £1 each year. WAA will set and collect rents, manage the waiting list and oversee the maintenance and improvement of sites.

5. Who from WAA has been involved with the negotiations?

Geoff Branner (Chair) and Andy Howells (Vice Chair). Discussions were initiated by the Town Clerk supported by Colin Roddan, a consultant to the Council.

6. When would things change?

If agreed by WAA in principle, the Council would instruct solicitors to draw up a lease for consideration by both parties. WTC has been making planning assumptions which include a possible transfer before or during the 2010/11 budget year. *[In the event various delays led to the transfer occurring on 1 April 2012 at the start of the 2012-13 year.]*

7. So why the long gap since the AGM when all this was first presented to tenants by WAA?

WAA has not wanted to rush such an important decision. It has been weighing up the options after further research and discussions with other Allotment Associations and the national body. We hope too that members will have had time to think through the proposals for themselves – although this and other documents, along with further discussion at the General Meeting on the 2nd December 2010, should help too.

8. Why can't we see the terms of the lease now?

The Council, understandably, does not wish to incur legal fees until agreement has been reached, in principle, by WAA. However, a model lease (adopted by Banbury) gives a clear statement of responsibilities on both parties. WAA would be satisfied with a similar agreement. (A copy will be available to look at in the WAA General Meeting on 2nd December.)

9. Is handing over the allotments now official Council Policy?

Yes – subject to sight of the lease and to detailed costings. The proposals were initiated by the Amenities Committee of WTC (presented 24 May 2010) and approved by Policy and Finance Committee (14th June 2010) and full Council on 23 June 2010.

10. Are WAA Committee members 100% behind taking on the management of allotments?

It's fair to say that members are under no illusion about challenges and demands of taking on a significant responsibility on a voluntary basis. However, at our meeting of 5 November 2010, there was unanimous agreement that this will be to the benefit of tenants and to the enjoyment they gain from allotment gardening.

11. What about the £400, 000 set aside for a new allotment site?

WTC continue to look for an additional site (or sites) to meet demand for allotments – using the money earmarked for this purpose. When completed the new site(s) will be incorporated within the lease and managed in the same way by WAA.

12. Why doesn't each individual allotment site self-manage?

That hasn't been the focus of our negotiations. Both sides feel that WAA, as an umbrella organisation, can ensure representation from all allotment sites while pooling the skills and resources needed for the benefit of all. However, we are determined to encourage active involvement of allotment holders in how things are run on their own site.

13. How will the particular interests of each allotment be represented?

The Committee has agreed there should be a reserved place on the WAA Committee for an allotment holder from each site – although the size of the committee remains flexible. (It currently comprises three officers and six members drawn from Lakeside (3), Hailey Road (3), Newland (2) Park Road (1).

14. Who represents WAA on an ongoing basis and how are they elected?

Three officers: Chair*, Secretary & Treasurer plus (currently) six members who together form the WAA Committee. All serve for a minimum of one year and may stand for re-election at an Annual General Meeting (AGM). We intend that one place be reserved for a member from each site – though the actual size of the committee may fluctuate from year to year. [*The office of Vice-chair was subsequently created.*]

15. Will rents go up?

We don't know – is the fairest answer. WAA intend to review the different levels of rents on each site and ensure sufficient funds to maintain and, where possible, improve things. However, our aim is to encourage self-help in order to keep rents low. Savings will be made because no rent will be used to cover the costs of administration and maintenance currently charged by the Council to the Allotments account.

16. How will rents (and water charges) be collected?

The process will be co-ordinated by a Committee member. We may use various methods including direct debit, collection at set times on allotments and at AGM, and payment by post.

17. What about the waiting list?

This would be managed by WAA. One of our committee members is willing to take it on. The Council wishes to charge a £15 administration fee for those already on and those joining the waiting list (Amenities Committee: 18/01/2010 & 08/03/2010). This is opposed by WAA and has been put on hold.

18. Do the officers and committee members have the capacity to 'run' the allotments?

This is a question of time, effort and skill! There is a good mix on the Committee at present with a strong commitment to make things work. We want to encourage wide involvement though – by a through-flow of people serving on the Committee in future years but mainly through people getting stuck in on their own allotment site. The more local involvement the happier and more 'capable' the Committee will be!

19. How long would the new arrangements last?

The lease would initially be for six years with the option of renewal after that.

20. What if it all goes pear-shaped – can we/the Council get out the arrangement?

There would be provision in the lease for these exceptional circumstances.

21. Who will maintain the boundary fences, trees and hedges?

In so far as they are currently the responsibility of the Council this would continue. For example, WTC have informed us that the Willows on one of the boundaries at Lakeside are pollarded on a five-year cycle in association with the neighbour. *[The Council subsequently confirmed they will retain responsibility for boundary walls and fences as stated in the Lease.]*

22. Who maintains the grassed paths and borders?

This would be our responsibility, although the maintenance of tarmac roads on Lakeside site would remain the responsibility of WTC.

23. Will I have my shed replaced when it needs it?

No – responsibility for the maintenance and repair of sheds would lie with individual allotment holder. It would be at their own discretion whether they install or replace a shed – subject to rules on size and materials.

24. What about water supply?

No two allotments are the same in this respect. However, allotment holders will be charged a share of the total cost of water used in addition to their rent. WTC currently have plans to install water troughs at Newlands but not at Park Road. *[Subsequently completed in 2011.]*

25. Who would I speak to if I have a complaint about the way the allotment is being run?

In the first instance you would speak with a Committee member from your allotment site and, if necessary, put your complaint in writing to the Secretary. *[A Disputes Panel is provided for in the Constitution and Rules of the Association.]*

26. What majority is needed to carry the vote one way or the other?

At our AGM of 6 July 2010 it was agreed that a two-thirds majority (of those casting a valid vote) would need to be in favour of transfer for WAA to accept WTCs proposal at this time. For example, if 100 people voted (including 3 spoiled papers) the transfer would be approved by 65 people voting in favour. This is calculated as follows: $(100 - 3) \times (2/3)$ rounded up.

27. What happens if the vote goes against change?

The allotments will continue to be managed on behalf of allotment holders by WTC. The WAA would keep the current arrangements under review and would continue to serve the best interest of its members as it has been. If it remains appropriate and the offer remains, WAA may seek to present the choice to members again in a year's time.

28. What happens if the vote is “yes” for change?

Members will be informed by notices posted on each allotment site after the ballot closes on Friday 10 December 2010. WTC will instruct its solicitors to draught a lease for consideration by WAA representatives and WTC. On approval WTC and WAA will continue to cooperate to ensure the completion of agreed works and timely handover of responsibilities.

29. Communication isn't brilliant is it – how will it improve?

We are aware of the need for clear, timely information to avoid people feeling 'in the dark'. Notice boards on each site would be a good start. Email addresses, from those who have and are willing to use them, will cut postal costs. A WAA allotment Website remains an aspiration. Also the AGM.