

ALLOTMENT BACKGROUND – 17TH JULY 2024

When the Parish Council first agreed to have an allotment site, the vision was that this would be self-managed by an Allotment Association as happens at so many other sites around the country. The Council became members of the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (NASLG) and were guided by them in setting up our documents.

When an opportunity arose to apply for funding for a community building/compost toilet on the site, the Elms Farm Allotment Association (EFAA) was established and a Committee elected who successfully applied for grant funding. On behalf of the EFAA, the Committee addressed issues such as installation of water troughs on the site.

As time went on, we moved towards handing over full management of the site (with the exception of the Tenancy Agreements) to the Committee. However, the members were reluctant to take on the plot inspections and the associated paperwork. After a period of time the members of the Committee gradually resigned and a member of our staff took on the role of Allotment Officer and undertook the inspections with the then Chair of Open Spaces, and then a Committee member. At the AGM held in 2023, a new Committee was elected.

We started the process again to hand management of the day-to-day issues including the inspections to the new committee. The new Committee worked hard to revise documents, set up new initiatives such as deliveries of manure etc and skip hire. They set up an independent email address and a new website.

We were contacted by a tenant who was unhappy with the handover of management and questioned the legality. He also drew to our attention the fact that whilst the 2024 AGM had been called this had not been done in the correct manner. We held in person meetings with this tenant and also with some members of the EFAA Committee to discuss the issues, after which we recommended that they should postpone the AGM whilst legal advice was sought. We sought advice from the NSALG and it was confirmed that everything we had done was legal and acceptable.

Following numerous discussions, involving at different times the Chair of the Council, the Chair of Open Spaces and the Vice-Chair of Open Spaces, they agreed with our thought process of bringing everything back in house and working towards finding an independent third party to manage the site on our behalf.

Our decision regarding this is based on the following reasons:

- 1 This is the second EFAA Committee and where we have received complaints about members.
- 2 We were informed that some members of the first committee were intending to try to have themselves voted back in this year and to oust the current members and take back the management of the site. They had agreed what roles they wanted to take on. Feedback from other tenants is that they were being approached and encouraged to vote in this way.
- 3 From experience built up since the allotment site opened, we knew that we would receive just as many complaints if this course of action went ahead.
- 4 Given that the first Committee made it clear they did not want to be responsible for the management, we believe that if this happened it would ultimately end up back with us again anyway.

Once this decision was made we held further in person meetings with members of the EFAA Committee and the tenant separately to explain how things would proceed and why we made this decision.

The decision was notified to all tenants by email on 3rd July 2024. We have been informed that a number of tenants claim not to have received the email which was sent to the addresses supplied by the tenant on renewal of their agreement in January 2024. We have the full email showing all the addresses that it was sent to. We did have two email bounce backs which were dealt with and a number of responses received so we know that it was received by some.

Since the email went out, we have received further complaints about the behaviour of what appears to be two different groups that have formed and have different opinions over the management of the site. As well as complaining to us about each other, a lot of tenants are complaining about their behaviour and how it is causing friction across the site and many tenants would like to be able to get on with their plot without the issues being caused by the two groups. Examples of the comments being received are:

- 1 "The previous association neither wanted to run the site themselves but they don't want the current committee to do so either. They are determined that they and their mates can continue to do as they please on what is a public resource, secured for the benefit of the whole village not just a privileged few."
- 2 "There are two groups arguing all the time and there have been instances of abuse as well as members taking matters into their own hands. Many other tenants just want to chill out and do what we have to do without all the friction."
- 3 "We have been approached by certain individuals who try to intimidate us into voting them onto the Committee at the AGM."
- 4 "I try to keep my head down as I do not want to get involved with the arguments between certain individuals on site. I just want to enjoy my plot without the stress of dealing with this. They just need to shut up and jog on as no one needs this pity the Council has to waste its time dealing with this."
- 5 "I try not to talk to anyone as its getting ridiculous and this is not what having an allotment plot is about."

Turning back to the future of the EFAA, in our correspondence to all tenants we asked if they believe there was a future role for the EFAA or whether they believe it should be disbanded. We did this because we were keen to ensure that the Committee re-convened the AGM in the correct manor and addressing issues or topics raised by tenants. Now we are receiving comments that the AGM business is nothing to do with the Parish Council as the EFAA is a stand alone organisation. We are very happy to step back and have nothing further to do with the administration of the EFAA and let the Committee call the AGM with the resulting outcome whatever it may be. The only responsibility the EFAA will have is to approach the office to request funds for items such as skip hire and manure/chipping deliveries etc.

It has become apparent that due to the different personalities on site there is no easy resolution other than for the council or an independent third party to retain management responsibilities.

We do not have the time or the inclination to try to referee arguments between grown adults at an allotment site and do not have the time to keep meeting in person with individual tenants every time they have a difference in opinion.

Prior to handing over the inspections to the EFAA Committee, we received comments that the Parish Council staff are not sufficiently knowledgeable to undertake inspections and they did not agree with our outcomes. We believe that having a third party manage the allotments

is the correct course of action. We do agree with comments that we do not spend enough time at the allotment site, it needs tighter control, someone with more experience, and more regular visits. Office staff fully agree that we do not know enough about allotments and cultivation and we do not have the hours to spend out on site so by appointing a third party, they will have a much more regular presence and hopefully achieve the desired outcome for the tenants and the council. Our plan is that the third party would also clear allotment plots which have been abandoned by its previous occupiers and would undertake the welcome tour with any potential new tenants.

As with previous Allotment Officers, the costs associated with this will be met by the Allotment fees.

We are grateful to Cllr Barnes and Cllr Love for assisting with the most recent inspections and we will continue to accompany them on these visits until the new regime is in place. This is to ensure that we are all covered against any complaints.

Ruth Clifford – Parish Clerk
Emma Philbrick – Deputy Clerk