

# MOORSIDE ALLOTMENTS ASSOCIATION

## Committee meeting

**5.30pm on Tuesday 4 April 2023**  
**Nunsmoor Centre, Fenham, NE4 5AH**

### **Present**

Frank Lightfoot (Chair), Steven McDonnell, Simon Rutherford, Barbara Taylor, Nick Coster, Sarah Farrell, Emily Sweetman, Richard Littlewood, Susan Pownall, Tony Whittle, Nicola Francis (arrived 5.40pm), Karen Brown (arrived 5.40pm)

### **1 Apologies for absence**

None.

### **2 Minutes of the previous meeting (7 March) and matters arising**

Hedge cutting with regard to birds and wildlife: Frank advised that the Wildlife Act (1981) was clear that hedges that should not be trimmed between 1 March and 31 August, or at any point in time when the person knows that roosting or nesting birds, or other wildlife is present.

Laurel, at the bottom of the East Lane: Susan had reminded Kevin Batey (Superintendent to the Freeman) that laurel needed removing. Some plot holders had been observed taking laurel trimmings away (perhaps for pea sticks). Anyone noticing this should intervene and remind others that the plant is poisonous.

#### Amendments:

- Susan advised that the health and safety board had been 'ordered', not that it was 'ready to bring', although it had since been brought.
- Emily noted for the record that on 9 March Sue Brophy had resigned from the committee and also from the Bee Garden and litter picking. Jean Hannon will continue to tend the Bee Garden.
- Tony corrected the recorded number of people on the waiting list to 33.
- Susan advised that Plot 8 would now offer his excess plants via the plant scheme rather than the Trading Hut.

Subject to the amendments the Minutes were AGREED as a true record (proposed by Barbara; seconded by Richard.)

**Action:** Emily to pass to Richard for publication.

### **3 Chair's Report**

Frank reported his intention to find ways to streamline the committee meeting agendas in order to create more time for discussion on items of importance.

Frank had taken an opportunity to meet with Kevin Batey, Superintendent to the Freeman and, through him, to understand their chief concerns in relation to allotment sites on Freeman land. One of these was the presence of children's play equipment such as trampolines. Frank has since spoken with plot holders who had trampolines on site (75 and 85) and agreed and overseen their removal (and assisted with disposal in one case).

Frank had made multiple unsuccessful attempts to contact the Newcastle Allotment Working Group (NAWG) in order to confirm his understanding of the approval route for plot holder applications (buildings etc). Kevin had said that the MAA Committee should deal with applications for any matter within the parameters of the lease, and pass its recommendations to Kevin for approval. Frank reported that Kevin had secured approval for the removal of the two small Plant Scheme greenhouses to the Community Plot.

#### **4 Treasurer's report**

##### **(a) Change of bank account signatory**

It was agreed that the committee would apply to submit a change of signatory mandate to Moorside Allotment Association's bank, Santander. Former Secretary, Susan Johnson's name would be removed and replaced with the current Secretary, Emily Sweetman. An up-to-date list of committee members would also be supplied.

**Action:** Nicola to check form of words required for minuted account and necessary details regarding committee members.

##### **(b) Freeman's new lease**

City-wide changes with parks and allotment management meant that, following a bidding process in September 2022, MAA would rent the site directly from the Freeman. The Freeman issued a new draft lease based closely on the former Newcastle City Council lease. The Committee would be expected to sign the lease and agree, for example, building, fire and plot cultivation standards. In the document attached to the agenda, Nicola had highlighted some key issues for consideration which she had already brought to the attention of the Freeman in writing:

Plant scheme: Question of whether it falls foul of revenue-earning rules. (It was noted that all profits are ploughed back into general maintenance and upkeep of the site on behalf of members.)

Bee policy: Approval may need to be confirmed by Freeman.

Tree, cutting/pruning: There was an apparent contradiction in another part of the lease where it is the stated responsibility of the local authority (who only prune or remove dead or dangerous trees). It was noted that fruit trees were exempt from these policies.

Cultivation: The lease said must be '75% vegetables' (i.e. not 'flowers, fruit and veg') in a change to the former local authority lease.

Cost implications: There was an apparent obligation to remove any buildings that fall outside of the parameters of the lease when that tenant leaves. Karen suggested keeping a log of all buildings which may need removal or alteration once plots became vacant.

Public liability requirements of £10 million: The minimum used to be £5m. Aside from the potential increased cost, raising the amount could lead to the Insurer insisting on other restrictions or requirements.

Termination of lease: The new lease would be for seven years (dated from September 2022 when the Freeman took over). Freeman could give a year's notice of termination, although would not end the lease part way through the growing season. Speedier terminations (three months) were allowed for other 'certain purposes' or in response to a breach, even if that was by a single plot holder.

Plots over 125m<sup>2</sup> to be reduced when they become vacant: MAA's existing policy was to check whether newly vacant plots could feasibly be halved, taking into account paths and other factors. Frank's initial assessment made onsite was that few plots were larger than 125m<sup>2</sup> although there was some discussion and this would need to be revisited.

Nicola advised that the MAA Tenancy Agreement should be reviewed in the light of the new lease and to ensure the Committee has the power to deal with breaches. Though this could not become imposed retrospectively, it would prevent new issues arising.

**Action:** Emily to add to forward plan.

Although the MAA Committee had not yet signed the Freeman's lease, it was generally considered that there was a de facto tenancy agreement on the basis of the bidding process that was undertaken in September 2022. It was noted that the Freeman had not yet invoiced the committee for payment nor instructed as to their preferred payment method.

Nicola reported that some other wartime sites had indicated that they were interested in how other sites were responding to the Freeman with regard to the lease. It was **AGREED** that Nicola would share the issues already highlighted with the Freeman, and ask to be kept informed of any ongoing discussion.

**Action:** Nicola.

Susan reminded the committee that the Chair of the Association was entitled to a rent-free plot and asked whether that was also the case for the Trading Hut manager, as it had once been. Frank clarified that, as Chair, he chose not to take advantage of a free plot but he proposed that Susan should be entitled to one as Trading Hut manager. This was unanimously **AGREED**, in recognition of it being an onerous role and in lieu of small expenses she may periodically incur in its undertaking.

## **5 Other updates**

### Trading hut (Susan)

Susan asked that the Trading Hut Manager's Report remain a standing item in future agendas. She reported that the Trading Hut proceeds in March were £824.03 which included seven bags of compost provided to the plant scheme.

Susan noted that the AGM accounts recorded the plant scheme as being £600 in credit. Nicola advised any adjustments between revenue streams could be made in the accounts and that this had been agreed with Fiona.

#### Inspection (Nick)

Nick reported that he, Frank, Steve and Simon had inspected that morning and identified 11 plots needing attention or a follow-up inspection. The only recommendations at this stage were 'to contact the tenant to determine their future plans'. Nick collated the inspection reports into a summary spreadsheet.

**Action:** Nick to circulate for information.

Frank confirmed that the team had intentionally looked for plots where no start had been made for the year. Next month's inspections would revisit those plots with a view to swift action if necessary. Recommendations would be logged and brought to the committee for decision. It was felt that the revised inspection process and careful recording ought to reassure the Freeman.

#### Lettings (Tony)

Tony reported movement within the site (Plot 60 to 79a; Plot 92 to plot 60; Plot 57B to Plot 18). **Action:** Emily to update the membership.

There was a discussion about moving (73b) to a full plot at the former plant scheme. The plot holder in question had made good progress on his half, demonstrated his commitment generally and was a former plot holder. He had not yet completed his three months probationary period, however. It was confirmed that there were no other plot holders currently seeking to move from a half to a full plot. It was **AGREED** that Tony and Frank would meet and consider the circumstances together to make a decision. If they were unable to do, so it would be returned to the committee for discussion.

### **6 Plant scheme**

Frank said that it had been generally understood from the previous meeting that, having established a team of volunteers to grow plants for and run the scheme, the committee would decide whether or not to move the two small plant scheme greenhouses to the community plot. A plan diagram was circulated with the agenda. It was **AGREED** to move the two greenhouses as per the plan (and as approved by Kevin Batey for the Freeman).

Steve reported that £51.13 had been spent on seeds and £37.80 on compost to date. Eleven growers had volunteered and many plants were underway in their own greenhouses, urgently needing removal to a larger space.

### **7 AGM proposal from John Spencer**

### **8 Inspections protocol**

Due to pressure of time, Frank proposed postponing items 7 and 8 until the next meeting.

### **9 Any other business**

Steve reported that safety assessments would take place in the coming months. The Health and Safety board was now erected.

Karen raised the question of potential for electronic voting or decision-making outside of committee meetings. Nicola advised that the current constitution did not allow for this, but there was always an option to call an ad hoc meeting.

It was **AGREED** to order a skip for sometime close to Easter, maximising the amount of notice to plot holders and ideally arranging this for a weekend day.

**Action:** Emily

Nicola noted that at the AGM, there was a discussion about repairs to the Trading Hut and the potential for establishing a volunteer maintenance team and a budget.

**Action:** Emily add to forward plan.

Tony proposed the committee consider the merits of appointing an Equalities Officer.

**Action:** Emily to add to forward plan.

Frank reported that Pat had raised the Moorside show and asked for volunteers from the committee. It was **AGREED** that a wider conversation was required about what kind of show was wanted and the degree of advance planning that would be necessary.

**Action:** Emily to add to forward plan.

Karen proposed that the committee construct a forward plan to allow such items to be considered in a timely fashion. Frank noted that in order to develop plans about how to improve the site for the benefits of all plot holders, and to reassure our landlords, some dedicated time might be required and tasks delegated to small groups to do initial thinking and bring back proposals. Further efforts would be necessary to streamline the agenda to make room for items of significance. It was **AGREED** that Zoom meetings would be a useful way to create additional time for discussion but that, in principle, standard meetings would be in person.

Emily reminded everyone to use the correct email addresses (as circulated) as some email conversations had gone undelivered to committee members or, in one case, been repeatedly sent to a complete stranger.

Emily reported an enquiry from the University of Portsmouth, conducting research about uses of common land and requesting to know the number of people on our waiting list. Their email confirms 'this is not an issue of complaint, but we want to draw a conclusion about the demand for allotment plots in our four case study sites (the others are in Brighton, Bristol and Norwich).' It was agreed to advise them of the number and that the waiting list is closed.

**Action:** Emily

**10     Date of next meeting**

5.30pm on Tuesday 2 May 2023

The meeting closed at 6:47pm  
(ES)