

## Northfields Allotments Plotolders Meeting

*29 October 2013, Northfields Community Centre*

The meeting was chaired by Christina Fox and Christine Charles and attended by some 3 dozen plotolders. The purpose of the meeting was to gauge the level of support for the idea of self-management by Northfields Allotments plotolders.

- The suggestion was that the plotolders would form an association, underpinned by a constitution, which would have an elected committee, to enter into a contract with Pathways, the landlord, to manage the allotments
- Prior to the existence of such an association there is already a "steering group" comprising Christina, Christine, Paul McConnell, Crispin Harris, Maureen March, Jon Wilkins, Syona Comerford, Mark and Kim Tompsett and Simon Coleman.
- Pathways have already held a trustee meeting and indicated that they would be willing to enter into such an arrangement
- The arguments for self-management, and the history of activity and meetings so far, was described at the meeting and there was a vote on the principle of self-management and all (but for one abstention) were in favour of this idea in principle
  - In addition, prior to the meeting, some other plotolders, who were unable to attend, wrote to express their support for the principle of self-management
- Haslemere Allotments are also in discussion with Pathways about self-management, and seem to be slightly ahead of Northfields in terms of organising
  - However when this was put to the vote by their plotolders it is understood that, although there was a clear majority in favour, there were two against (although the reasons given are not known)
- Besides Haslemere, many other allotments (mainly council-owned) in/around Ealing are already under self-management and this indicates that there is a lot of existing local expertise and experience of setting up and running a plotolders' self-management scheme, and the steering group is in touch with individuals in these groups, along with others who can be found through EAP (Ealing Allotment Partnership) <http://www.ealingallotmentpartnership.co.uk/> and EHAS (Ealing and Hanwell Allotment Association) <http://www.london21.org/page/85/show/3028>
- There are different levels of self-management scheme that could be considered, but as yet there are no firm proposals as to what level of self-management scheme is envisaged for Northfields, and that would now be a key focus of the activity of the steering group, ie to propose one or more specific scheme(s) to be considered
  - For instance, there was discussion about the collection of rents, such that one proposal would be that the proposed association should issue rent invoices and collect payments, out of which it pays an agreed rent to Pathways (which currently appear to operate the allotments at an apparent loss because of the management time charged to the allotments, which could be expected to be dramatically reduced by devolving the day-to-day management to a proposed self-management body)
- There was some discussion about the activities of Cultivate London, <http://cultivatelondon.org/> an organisation set up by Maria Gledhill (Chief Executive of Pathways), which as well as operating as a charity (to help young people, target age group

16-24, with training and experience in practical horticulture) also operate a commercial trading company to sell the produce grown

- Cultivate London currently occupy a plot in Brentford which they are having to vacate because the land has been sold for development and therefore need to move elsewhere, and it is understood that they have two options for doing so, one of which is the use of the top-end of the Northfields Allotments (7 plots apparently, some of which are unoccupied at Pathways' request) although concern was expressed at the meeting that this land might then be targeted for housing development
- However, if Cultivate London were to make use of this land then this would presumably constitute a change of use, ie to one of a commercial purpose, which might be in contravention of any conditions under which the land was provided, and efforts are being made to establish whether there are any covenants in place which might be breached under such circumstances
- There was also discussion about software to support the operation of a self-management scheme and there is known to be a "cloud based" allotment management system, called MyColony <https://www.mycolony.co.uk/> (although it is not known if there are any suitable alternatives to compare it with) but, on the face of it, the system appears to offer all of the functionality envisaged for such an operation, and seems to be readily affordable, ie less than £200 per year, for the number of plots involved.
- Pathways are also looking for a temporary allotment manager to keep the place ticking over until self management is organised and agreed upon. Pathways were happy for a plot holder to fulfil this role and Christine Charles has said she would be willing to do this. We took a vote and everyone agreed this was a good idea.
- With the overall support we have been given at meeting, online and in person I think we can pretty confidently say that we have the majority support of plotheholders to go ahead for self management.

The next step is to get the steering group together and agree on a constitution. If you wish to be involved please let me know. If you are interested in standing for the committee we would be keen to hear from you.

- At the meeting someone asked what skills/qualifications would you need to be on the committee. The first priority is to be a plot holder. It will be really important that committee members understand the needs of plot holders and are available on site to chat to people. Second it would be a big help to have some basic computer skills. Email is a cheaper way to communicate than post - a second class letter to all plot holder would cost us over £60. So, as much as possible we will want to use email and the forum to communicate and save our money for important things like maintaining the paths. Plus, if the committee agrees to buy into the myColony software (mentioned above) you'll need an internet connection to access it. However, you would get training to use it.

Christina Fox