



Cottonmill & Nunnery Allotment Association

POLICE & COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES

Minutes of a meeting at St Albans Sub-Aqua Club to Discuss the Matter of Break-ins on Allotments

Chair: Hazel Marsden
 Speakers: Sharon Foster – Neighbourhood Officer (Herts Police)
 Nick Sheriff (St Albans DC)
 Tony Clarke (St Albans DC – Anti-Social Behaviour Unit)

Attendees: Approx 100, with representatives from the following sites: Cottonmill, Sopwell, Nunnery, Camp 1, Camp 2, Sandridge, Burydell (Park Street); Cunningham Avenue;

The proposed actions from the meeting are listed below, full detailed minutes are documented under this list.

No.	Proposed actions from the meeting	Who
1.	Shed Alarms Tony Clarke (Council) to investigate sourcing shed alarms for all the allotment sites at a reduced price.	Tony Clarke
2.	Reporting crimes Allotment holders to report incidents, however minor, immediately to Herts Police neighbourhood team on : 0845 3300222	All site representatives
3.	Police crime report contacts PC Foster will prepare new posters, with full contact details, for each allotment site.	PC Foster
4.	Grant opportunities Nick Sherriff to supply details of the Grant Net site, which details grant opportunities. See detail below. "here is a site that will allow you to look for grants for non profit/Govt organisations that you may be able to apply for funding from. This is a diluted version of GRANT FINDER but is Free to use although you will need to register". http://www.grantnet.com/index.php?r=3	Complete see notes left.
5.	Visibility of SADC capital budget for allotment sites Nick Sherriff to ask Dan Flitton to confirm the annual capital works budget available across all allotment sites.	Nick Sherriff / Dan Flitton
6.	Create a cross-site group including representatives to discuss key issues and priorities for the sites. Particularly in relation to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council spending on the plots • Fencing & Secure steel sheds • Planting thorny shrubs and plants as deterrent • Raising funds for works through grants – through grantfinder or grant net • Consulting with other groups who have successfully gained grants (Bee Keepers) for advice. 	Hazel Marsden to co-ordinate
7.	Locking gates SADC to investigate the fact that Camp 2 gates cannot be locked from the inside.	Nick Sherriff
8.	UV pens – events for marking of equipment PC Foster to organise community days to mark looks and belongings with special marker pens that show up under UV light. These could be linked to association or site events.	PC Foster
9.	Site visits and regular council/ police meetings PC Foster / Dan Flitton & Hazel Marsden to coordinate setup of regular meetings with representatives from all sites.	PC Foster / Dan Flitton & Hazel Marsden

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Date: 6 March 2008

Chair: Hazel Marsden

Speakers: Sharon Foster – Neighbourhood Officer (Herts Police)
Nick Sheriff (St Albans DC)
Tony Clarke (St Albans DC – Anti-Social Behaviour Unit)

Generally: The meeting was called to discuss how the various allotment groups, working with SADC and Herts Police, might address the ongoing issue of break-ins to allotments – a matter causing some concern and distress to individual allotment holders. The meeting was well attended by a mix of allotment holders from across the District (approximately 100 attendees).

The first speaker was PC Sharon Foster, who introduced herself as the Neighbourhood officer for Sopwell and Nunnery. PC Foster gave a brief bit of background, explaining Herts Police understanding of the problem and their efforts to reduce incidences of trespass and burglary on the allotments. PC Foster has tried various methods to catch trespassers, including sitting out at night in sheds on different allotments to catch the perpetrators in the act. One of the key issues, according to PC Foster, is that incidences of trespass and burglary are either not reported at all, or if they are reported, Herts Police are advised too late.

Herts Police believes that break-ins happen in spates, and are assessing the data to try and establish patterns. There is a theory that some of the perpetrators are 'outsiders' coming into the area and stealing tools and other goods for sale in car boot sales, for example. However, the patterns of the break-ins seem to suggest to plot holders, that most perpetrators are local.

PC Foster has had meetings with Dan Flitton to assess what might be done. Some suggestions for allotments holders:

- Don't leave valuables in sheds overnight;
- Don't lock your shed, as it invites the curiosity of thieves;
- Perhaps try a shed alarm – they are relatively inexpensive (£14.99) – and have scared off youths attempting to break into sheds on other allotments; and
- Plant thorny species of shrubs along boundaries to make them less permeable.

PC Foster accepts that there is an issue with multiple access points along the some allotment boundaries. There might also be instances where allotments located within a Conservation Area might have difficulty in getting permission for a suitably robust fence.

PC Foster has put in place a 'Trigger Plan', which provides a rapid response to reports of anti-social behaviour, etc., within her Neighbourhood Area. This is the same Plan that is being used across the District and officers will respond to reports of incidents as a team in an attempt to ensure a positive outcome. Harpenden, St Albans and London Colney are covered by the same Neighbourhood Team. According to PC Foster, Herts Police can, and will, respond quickly to calls from allotment holders. The number to call is: 0845 3300222.

PC Foster will prepare new posters, with full contact details, for each allotment site.

Comments from the floor:

One member of the audience (Cottonmill) noted that the fence that had run along the banks of the River Ver had been taken down, allowing access from the footpath on the opposite bank. It was also easy access to be had from Prospect Road.

SADC advised that the fence was removed for safety reasons, to which point it was suggested, from the floor, that a willow fence had been proposed as an alternative to the security fence, but this had never been provided. Also noted, from the floor, that a greater number of people with children are taking allotments at Cottonmill and Health and Safety may be an issue, with respect to children having access to the river.

SADC response is quite clear: parents have to take responsibility for their own children.

Tony Clarke: SADC ASBU is working with Herts Police to identify patterns of incidences. They are also deploying cameras, which can be placed at any of the St Albans allotment sites, and can be assessed in 'real time', as they have a wireless facility. ASBU has powers to evict council tenants convicted of a criminal offence, as they are in breach of their tenancy agreement. Furthermore, legislation passed last year, makes it possible for parents of children convicted of criminal damage, for example, to be made liable for payment of compensation.

From the floor: issue of fencing is important to allotment holders. Cottonmill, for example, has a section of fence along the southern edge that has not been replaced since it was damaged – why is that?

Camp 1 allotment holder noted that there is a security fence along 75% of the boundary – but hasn't been completed – possibly due to the failure of a developer who, it is understood, had been required to provide the fencing as part of a planning permission.

At Burydell, according to an allotment holder, the fencing is also incomplete. The potential for the use of anti-vandal paint was raised. Another allotment holder from Burydell noted that the hedge had been felled to a height of 3ft, making it easy to climb to access the site.

It was suggested, by a member of the audience, that SADC has a 'duty of care' to the allotment holders, although it was not clear as to the extent of that 'duty of care', should one exist.

Tony Clarke: the various allotment associations can access grant funding that the council cannot, to improve their environment, among other benefits. There are websites, such as Grant Finder, that identify which grants are available, who might be eligible and how to go about applying. The St Albans Bee Keepers' Group has successfully applied for grant funding – perhaps they could share their experience with the allotment holders?

Suggested, from the floor, that more steel sheds might be a way of protecting people's property, as cheaper, flimsier sheds are easy to damage/access. SADC advised that there is a cost attached to these types of units. One allotment holder from Camp 1 believes that the steel shed on that site has a 'private' padlock, meaning she can't use it. SADC, and others from the floor, advised that the lock is not private, and that key can be had from members of the association.

Suggested that SADC might investigate the possibility of buying a large number of alarms, taking advantage of economies of scale. These would then be available to allotment holders to buy at a reduced rate.

A question from the floor regarding SADC budget for capital works on the allotments each year. Agreed by the audience that it would be helpful to have the capital works budget confirmed by SADC. The various allotment associations might then be involved in deciding the priority for spending this money. To do this, perhaps a group of allotment holders, representing each of the different sites (including those without associations) might be convened.

PC Foster suggested that she would like to organise a number of community days to mark tools/belongings with special marker pens that show up under UV light. Suggested that, perhaps, Herts Police could provide the pens and the allotment associations could manage the marking of property.

A question was asked, from the floor, regarding whether people should challenge strangers. PC Foster suggested that different responses might apply depending on the circumstances. Allotment holders should use their best judgement depending on the nature/number of the people concerned,

SADC advised that the grounds maintenance contract can be varied by line item, modifying the cuts that contractors do to hedges, for example. This might be done along the river's edge at Cottonmill, making for a more impermeable boundary.

There was a discussion regarding the locking of gates, with some allotment holders suggesting that locking the gates made them feel unsafe, while others believed that locking the gates was a basic safety requirement. Both points well made, but the general consensus would seem to be that gates should be locked. On the same issue, it was noted that Camp 2 gates could not be locked from the inside. SADC to investigate this.

Summing up:

PC Foster advised she would be meeting with Dan Flitton to discuss a site visit to all the allotment sites, the aim being to see what might be done for each site with respect to improving safety and security.

Generally agreed that this useful session needs to be followed up – the attendance and level of interest clearly supports this view. The last meeting was some 18 months ago and nothing seems to have come of it. Concern raised that SADC not engaging properly with allotment holders when they are contacted.

Inputs from the various groups/authorities need to be co-ordinated to make the best use of resources and individual's willingness to become involved.