

Henley-on-Thames Allotments Association

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A Year of Improvements for Henley Allotments

It has been a very good year for Henley's allotments, with lots of welcome improvements. These are summarised below:-

1. Allotment Use at an All-Time High

- a) Tenant numbers have increased rapidly over the past 36 months, growing from 120 persons in 2006 to over 180 in 2009. This has been accommodated up until now by splitting 10 pole plots into 2 x 5 pole plots, and bringing unkempt plots back into use. This has helped the sites look tidier, as new tenants take on smaller, more manageable pieces of land. However, the scope to continue to do this is limited.
- b) The proportion of families and younger tenants has increased, particularly at Watermans. This can be attributed to the following factors: 1) Trendy TV programmes encouraging vegetable growing. 2) People having a better understanding and appreciation of the health benefits that allotments provide. 3) Children are being encouraged to understand where their food comes from, and how it is cultivated. 4) People are realising that home-grown food tastes better than supermarket-bought food, and it is cheaper too! 5) People want to 'do their bit' for the environment by reducing their food miles, and by recycling as much as they can of their food and garden waste via composting. Health charities are also aware of the benefits that allotment gardening can bring to their clients, and both 'Mind' and 'Headway' regularly work an allotment at each site with great success.
- c) Waiting lists are at an all-time high, with over 20 people waiting for allotments at present. Although the boundary limits have been reduced from 15 miles to 5 kilometres to help with this situation, and many plots have been halved, it will become increasingly more difficult to accommodate the expected demand.
- d) Communication to tenants is much improved, with a newsletter going out to tenants 6 times a year. The newsletter is used to communicate changes in the tenancy agreements (e.g. boundary reduction), and to update tenants on current issues, as well as to promote the busy social calendar. Over 50% of newsletters are now e mailed rather than posted, which has helped the AA keep costs down.
- e) New social events have been added to the calendar, including a Tenants' Christmas Dinner, a trip to Wisley (RHS garden), and a Scarecrow Competition for children. The Spring Boat Cruise continues to be the highlight of the season, with over 70 people attending this May. Other regular events include the Summer BBQ, Gardeners' Question Time, a Cookery Demonstration Evening and a children's Sunflower and Pumpkin Competition.

2. Improved Working Relationships between the AA and the Council

- a) Becky Walker who has taken over from Linda Martin continues to provide the Town Council and the Allotment Association with a single point of contact for all day-to-day allotment matters. This has speeded up communication, and resulted in significantly better-managed tenant lists, rent collection, and tenant policing. Becky is responsible for maintaining the tenants' list, managing the Tenancy Agreements and collecting rents. The two Site Managers (on behalf of the Council) manage the existing tenants, maintain the waiting lists, agree the new tenants, give notice to rogue tenants and manage the sites on a day-to-day basis.
- b) Closer relationships with Henley-in-Bloom have been developed, which has benefitted the HIB campaign. Joint events have also taken place, such as Gardeners' Question Time in November 2008 and the Plant and Seed Sale/Swap in Market Place in May 2009.

3. Administration at an All-Time Best

- a) In October 2008 all tenants were sent a new Tenancy Agreement, clarifying the new rents, and the allotment rules and regulations. All tenants are required to sign this document and return it to Council, thus ensuring that they have read and understood their responsibilities, and accepted them.
- b) An up-to date computerised tenants' database is constantly maintained by Linda, containing the name and address, tenancy agreement status, e mail address, date of birth, etc of each tenant. This list also drives the site 'plan view', which is a visual plan of each site, with the current tenants' names on.
- c) Tenants who fail to maintain their plots are being given notice by the Site Managers during the season, and their plots are being re-let immediately. This has helped waiting lists as well as the appearance of the sites.
- d) Rent collection is now 100%, resulting for the first time ever with more rent being collected than money budgeted by the Council to be spent on the allotments. This has been achieved by increasing rents significantly over the past 2 years and decreasing the Council's budget for allotments. The rent has again been increased further for 2009/10 to £36 for a 10 pole plot, which should provide around £3200 rental income for the next allotment year. Concession rates changed on October 1st 2009, with the age for concession rates increasing from 60 to 65, and the rent reduction decreasing from 50% to 33%.

It is worth noting that there has been some discussion to increase allotment rents further in 2010/11 to £42. Given all the improvements that have happened this year, and the steep increase in rents that tenants have already paid, the Allotment Association would not support a further increase to £42 (which would amount to 90% increase over 3 years).

4. Specific Site Improvements

a) **Watermans** : The entrance to the site has been made much safer by the purchase of the strip of land adjoining Reading Road, and the removal of the dead elm hedge which obscured the site lines. A new fence has been erected and a hedge planted alongside the fence on the southern boundary. Daffodils and snowdrops have been planted on the grass verge alongside the main road. Damaged sheds, targets for vandals, have been removed and a new notice board has been erected at the entrance to the site.

We are in discussion with the Town Council on how to keep deer out of the site and discourage vandals.

b) **Greencroft**: The site continues to be pretty tidy, the Japanese Knotweed has been eradicated, and the relationship with the Cricket Club continues to develop e.g. good communication regarding the proposed new Cricket Club Pavilion. The Car Park area is soon to be tidied up and some new fencing erected.

Henley Allotments Association Awards - 2009

A number of awards are given out in October every year; these include Best Plot, Best Newcomer and Best Site. Awards are also given to children for the Tallest Sunflower, Largest Pumpkin and Best Scarecrow. The prizes were awarded by the Mayor, Elizabeth Hodgkin who said to the allotment holders, "Thank you for continuing the tradition - it's a great hobby. We've got to get back to basics, to feeding ourselves and knowing where our food comes from."

5. Fantastic New Website

The website has been completely re-vamped and re-launched in early February. Graham Jones, Jon Lock and Liz Reid have spent the last three months working on this project, and the site is now completely up-to-date. The site includes all kinds of information about how to rent an allotment, information for new plot holders, Committee members and contact details, site maps, weather forecasts, social events, newsletter, minutes of the AA meetings, recipes, links to various gardening sites and much more. A plot holders' chat room is also available, which will allow plot holders to swap advice/produce/ideas as the season's progress. If you regularly use the internet, please spend a few minutes visiting the new website www.henleyallotments.org.uk.

6. Future Developments

Henley Town Council is looking for extra allotments to help reduce the waiting list. There are no obvious options: purchasing land would be very expensive, so it is looking to convert some of the land it already owns or to rent private land on a long term lease.

The waiting time for a plot is rapidly increasing, as the ability to split 10 pole plots in to 2 x 5 poles has reached saturation point, and it is anticipated that the current waiting list of 19 will take up to a year to accommodate. Henley Town Council is very keen to support this amenity, and is hopeful of providing more allotments for the future. We will keep you updated!

